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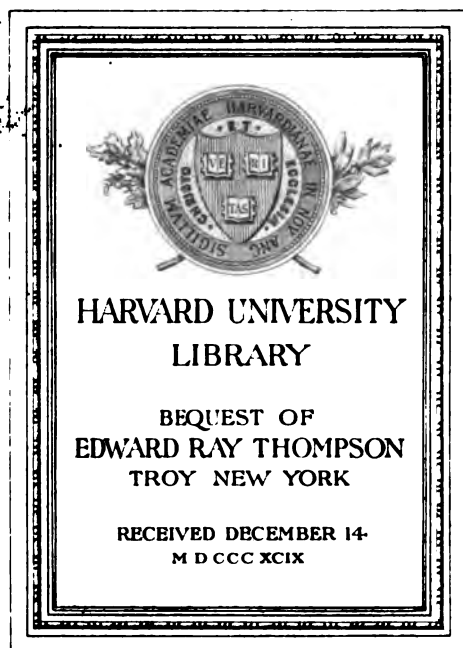
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No 131.....

INTRODUCTION.

TEN years have passed since the completion of my critical survey of the poets and poetry of England from the beginning of the present reign. The scheme of the *Victorian Poets* included, besides an extended review of acknowledged leaders, a concise analysis of groups forming the general choir of the period represented. The work thus became somewhat complete in scope, and doubtless has served as a critical handbook and means of reference. This incidental result, however, was quite subordinate to the author's main design; and I think that such a fact was evident not only to a professional class, but to all readers interested concerning the spirit and methods of poetry, — especially of our English song.

To that design I wish shortly to refer, as it is the chief motive of the present volume also. But first I would reproduce a statement made in the Preface to the former work, viz., — that the author originally had undertaken to write upon the poets of this country and the causes of their successes and failures; that on examination he had found modern and radical changes in the conditions affecting ideal effort, at home and abroad;

that for this and other reasons he could "more freely and graciously begin by choosing a foreign paradigm than by entering upon the home-field, and that none could be so good for the purpose as the poetry of Great Britain." It seemed to him, also, that, until after some training of this kind, "affection, reverence, national feeling, or some less worthy emotion, might be thought to prevent an American from writing without prejudice" of the poets of his own country. Certainly he could attempt this more profitably when the changes mentioned should be more complete, and the careers more rounded of the chief American writers who would pass under review.

The time came when I felt emboldened to renew my original undertaking, and the result is set forth in this volume. My belief is strengthened that the earlier treatise was essential to it, and, in fact, the most expedient preliminary task that could be chosen. The modern conditions, as far as they relate to both countries, could be observed more directly in England than in America, their stress being there of earlier origin and less diffused. My previous synopsis of them now has only to be condensed, and supplemented by discussion of those other conditions that are peculiar to this country alone. Furthermore, I regard the treatise on British poetry as of less significance, in its field of observation, than the work now following it; and I trust that reasons for this opinion—to which some at first may demur—will become apparent to those who give more than a cursory

reading to these essays. Even now few Americans set a proper value on the relative bearing of our ideal and intellectual progress thus far. The instinctive deference of a young nation to its elders, and the frequent assurance of the latter that our progress has been restricted chiefly to physical achievement, have united until a recent date to make us accept that view of the matter. Aesop's lion discovered that the honors of a contest depend largely upon the sculptor that commemorates it. If there were a stake-boat, a winning-post, by which the comparative import (waiving the question of inherent value) of national activities could be measured exactly, various estimates might be disestablished. What is of most concern, in relation to the *theme* of this work, is the fact that the literature—even the poetic literature—of no country, during the last half-century, is of greater interest to the philosophical student, with respect to its bearing on the future, than that of the United States. My judgment is to this effect, after years in which I have read a good deal of native and foreign comment upon the subject. The reasons for it are generally perceptible in the ensuing chapters, but three may be stated here succinctly: 1. American poetry, more than that of England during the period considered, has idealized—often inspired—the national sentiment, the historic movements, of the land whose writers have composed it. 2. This nation already,—in the second century of a growth which began not in barbarism, but in political civilization,—is gaining in strength, population, and the liberal

arts, at an accelerative speed that soon must make it a typical exemplar of ideal as well as material production. Nor can there be a time when the bent of its ideality will be more suggestive than now, for the present angle determines the arc of the future. 3. The first true course of American poetry has distinguished the principal term covered in these essays; a first heat has been run during that time, to whose leaders special chapters are devoted. It is rare that an epoch so definitely begun and ended can be selected as the object of synthetic examination. The reader is invited to study a period as distinct in literature as our Constitutional period in politics, or the Thirty Years' War in history; one, moreover, in which poetry bore closer relations to the life and enthusiasm of a people than it often has borne in other lands and times.

We see, also, that this term has been singularly concurrent with that of the Victorian hemicycle, so that an examination of the poetry of our English tongue for the last fifty years is compassed in my two books. In order to perceive the evolution of a new minstrelsy from its foreign and native germs, the opening chapters of this volume are occupied partly with the efforts of the Colonial verse-writers and their immediate successors. A final chapter contains a rapid summary of what is now doing, as a basis for speculation on the outlook and the chances of a revival in the future. The reader thus obtains a general view of American poets and poetry from

Nevertheless, the main purpose of this work, as suggested heretofore, is to continue my former effort, by obtaining further illustrations of the poetic life, and ideas with respect to the spirit and methods of the art of poetry. The marginal Analysis and topical Index are planned to accord with this intention. My views were formulated to some extent in our consideration of the transatlantic field. They can be emphasized in no way more readily than by fresh and personal examples which are a kind of object-lessons ; by criticism of a new series of poets, employing the same tongue, but varying in genius and temperament, and influenced by the conditions of a distinct environment.

The tenor of the original discussion, which I have no reason to modify seriously, was in favor of simplicity, impulse, sincerity, as opposed to obscurity, didacticism, and the affectation either of refinement or a "saucy roughness," —always in behalf of imagination, and against the multiform devices proffered, consciously or unconsciously, in lieu of that supreme quality. It placed construction before decoration, the tone of a composition above its detail, and looked to the spirit rather than the structure, —not content, however, with the half-truth of a writer who declares that poetry is a spirit, not a form, —the truth being that poetry is a spirit, taking form. Finally, I welcomed every sign of healthy passion and every promising dramatic tendency, both invigorating after a prolonged reflective period. Various sins of commission were discoverable among the lesser pupils of

Wordsworth, the "spasmodic" lyrists, the Neo-Romantic artificers, etc., and frequently an absence was noted of merits that undoubtedly are found in our native verse—simplicity and honest impulse. The last-named traits do not of themselves suffice, for spontaneity must be allied with power. American singers often have been more natural than imaginative, and have risen to passion only in rare individual or public crises. Our most noted group, that of New England, distinguished for grace and scholarship, fervent in conviction and of marked intellectuality, has been pronounced too thin-blooded; what sensuousness enriches American poetry has appeared chiefly in the work of its middle and younger schools. On the other hand, our verse has been measurably free from the vice of over-decoration, prevalent in the writings of the minor British romanticists ten years or more ago. It is to be hoped that the trace of this now observed is something from which the new school soon will free itself. And I here say to our young writers, as I have said again and again with respect to their foreign standards, that in literature, as in architecture, construction must be decorated, not decoration constructed,—that invention must precede them both,—and that, if imagination be clouded and the glow of passion unfelt, it is utter and worthless jugglery to compose at all. An enumeration, in a closing chapter, of younger poets and their efforts is purposely uncritical, except in the case of Lanier; it aims to show these at their best, but the fact is not gainsaid that there is a

lull in the force and efficacy of American song. My conclusion is that we are not experiencing a decadence, but rather a diversion of imaginative energy to new forms of employment, and this not without a fair compensation. It may be well that our verse thus should escape the phase of minute realism and analysis through which modern literature is passing, and which probably will give way before a dramatic and inventive impulse by the time a second epoch of poetic achievement shall be inaugurated.

My review of the exquisite productions of Tennyson and his compeers led to consideration of the methods of poetry as an art. Apt illustrations were at hand, and my remarks often and designedly were addressed to fellows of the craft. The present work is less technical; I have more to say of the poetic temperament and the conditions that affect it; more of poetry as the music of emotion, faith, aspiration, and all the chords of life. The atmosphere in which our poets have flourished is observed, as well as their special aids and hindrances and whatever has been significant in their various careers. The *personality* of the noted American minstrels has been more suggestive than that of their English contemporaries. In this respect they bear a likeness to the poets of the Georgian era. With few exceptions the Victorian brotherhood, living under advanced social and literary systems, have been neither greatly involved with the action and history of their time nor picturesquely conspicuous as individuals. Nevertheless, it is not the

main thing, in writing of a poet, to consider the experiences which he shares in common with other men. He must be judged by things peculiar to himself — the creative gift and work that bring him within the franchise of literary criticism. The estimate, then, to a certain extent must be technical ; and so far as my own comment has been addressed to the literary class, its endeavor is, as a Californian author pleases me by saying, to get down to the bed-rock of poetry as an art and to its pure gold as an inspiration. If passages occur where the agreement of polite thinkers, as to established processes and conclusions, is not assumed as a matter of course, it is because I hope this volume will be read by some who hitherto have paid slight attention to its topics. There is no good reason why a critical treatise, like any other work, should not appeal to both select and general readers, though possibly on very diverse grounds of interest.

During the preparation of this work, the last of its kind that I shall publish, I have had my share of the ills from which none are quite exempt. It has been delayed by the rarity of intervals at which I could devote a wholesome energy to its completion, and feel assured that it would betray no tinge of personal discouragement. If injustice has been done, in the delicate task of making even the slightest reference to one's literary associates, it has not been of malice aforethought.

Acknowledgment is due to friends, — especially to

ture" office,—and to Mr. G. T. Elliot, the scholarly corrector at the Riverside Press, and his assistants, for professional courtesies in aid of my labor now ended ; also to my son, Arthur Stedman, for expert revision of copy and verification of names and dates. Where authorities differ, or are silent, with respect to matters of fact, I have consulted—as far as practicable—the persons directly interested, except in the cases of living female writers whose dates of birth are not given already in standard compilations.

E. C. S.

NEW YORK, September, 1885.

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POETS OF AMERICA.

The subjoined list comprises the American poets, translators, and dramatists, to whom attention is directed in this volume. Their names, together with those of various American prose-writers, etc., are to be found in the concluding INDEX.

TIME: 1607-1885.

ABBAY, HENRY,
ALBEE, JOHN,
ALCOTT, AMOS BRONSON,
ALDRICH, THOMAS BAILEY,
ALGER, WILLIAM ROUNSEVILLE,
ALLEN, ELIZABETH ANN AKERS,
ALLSTON, WASHINGTON,
ARNOLD, GEORGE.

BARLOW, JOEL,
BATES, CHARLOTTE FISKE,
BEERS, HENRY AUGUSTIN,
BENJAMIN, PARK,
BENTON, JOEL,
BIRD, ROBERT MONTGOMERY,
BLOEDE, GERTRUDE,
BLOOD, HENRY AMES,
BOKER, GEORGE HENRY,
BONER, JOHN HENRY,
BOTTA, ANNE CHARLOTTE
LYNCH,
BOYSEN, HJALMAR HJORTH,
BRADLEY, MARY,
BRADSTREET, ANNE,
BRAINARD, JOHN GARDINER
CALKINS,
BROOKS, CHARLES TIMOTHY,
BROOKS, MARIA GOWEN,
BROWNE, HENRY HOWARD,
BRYANT, WILLIAM CULLEN,
BUNNER, H. C.,
BUSHNELL, FRANCES LOUISA,

BUTLER, WILLIAM ALLEN,
BYLES, MATHER.

CARLETON, HENRY GUY,
CARLETON, WILL,
CARY, ALICE,
CARY, PHOEBE,
CHADWICK, JOHN WHITE,
CHANNING, WILLIAM ELLERY,

2D,

CHENEY, JOHN VANCE,
CHILD, LYDIA MARIA,
CLYMER, ELLA DIETZ,
COLES, ABRAHAM,
CONANT, HELEN STEVENS,
CONANT, SAMUEL STILLMAN,
CONE, HELEN GRAY,
CONRAD, ROBERT TAYLOR,
COOKE, JOHN ESTEN,
COOKE, PHILIP PENDLETON,
COOKE, ROSE TERRY,
COOLBRITH, INA DONNA,
COKE, ARTHUR CLEVELAND,
CRANCH, CHRISTOPHER PEARSE,
CROSWELL, WILLIAM.

DANA, RICHARD HENRY,
DE KAY, CHARLES,
DE VERE, MARY AINGE,
DINSMORE, ROBERT,
DOANE, GEORGE WASHINGTON,
DODGE, MARY MAPES,

DORGAN, JOHN ALYMER,
DORR, JULIA CAROLINE RIPLEY,
DRAKE, JOSEPH RODMAN,
DUFFIELD, SAMUEL WIL-
LOUGHBY,
DUNLAP, WILLIAM,
DWIGHT, TIMOTHY.

EASTMAN, CHARLES GAMAGE,
EGAN, MAURICE FRANCIS,
ELLSWORTH, ERASTUS WOLCOTT,
EMERSON, RALPH WALDO,
ENGLISH, THOMAS DUNN.

FAWCETT, EDGAR,
FESSENDEN, THOMAS GREEN,
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FIELDS, JAMES THOMAS,
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FOSTER, STEPHEN COLLINS,
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FROTHINGHAM, ELLEN,
FROTHINGHAM, NATHANIEL
LANGDON.

GALLAGHER, WILLIAM DAVIS,
GILDER, RICHARD WATSON,
GODFREY, THOMAS,
GOODALE, DORA READ,
GOODALE, ELAINE,
GRANT, ROBERT,
GREEN, JOSEPH,
GREENOUGH, SARAH DANA LOR-
ING,
GUINEY, LOUISE IMOGEN.

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HALPINE, CHARLES GRAHAM,
HARNEY, WILLIAM WALLACE.

HAY, JOHN,
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WORTH,
HILLHOUSE, JAMES ABRAHAM,
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KING, EDWARD,
KINNEY, ELIZABETH CLEMEN-
TINE.

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McMASTER, GUY HUMPHREY,
MELVILLE, HERMAN,
MILLER, CININNATUS HINER
(JOAQUIN),

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MITCHELL, WALTER,
MITCHILL, SAMUEL LATHAM,
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MOULTON, LOUISE CHANDLER,
MUHLENBERG, WILLIAM AUGUSTUS,
MUNFORD, WILLIAM.

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NORTON, ANDREWS,
NORTON, CHARLES ELIOT,
NORTON, JOHN.

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O'BRIEN, FITZ-JAMES,
O'HARA, THEODORE,
O'REILLY, JOHN BOYLE,
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OSSOLI, SARAH MARGARET FULLER.

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PALMER, RAY,
PARSONS, THOMAS WILLIAM,
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PEABODY, WILLIAM BOURNE
OLIVER,

PECK, SAMUEL MINTURN,
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PERRY, NORA,
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WHITMAN, WALTER,
WHITNEY, ADELINE DUTTON
TRAIN,

WHITTIER, JOHN GREENLEAF,
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WRIGHT, WILLIAM BULL.

YOUNG, WILLIAM.

POETS OF AMERICA.

POETS OF AMERICA.

CHAPTER I.

EARLY AND RECENT CONDITIONS.

I.

IT is my design to trace the current of poesy, deepening and widening in common with our streams of riches, knowledge, and power; to show an influence upon the national sentiment no less potent, if less obvious, than that derived from the historic records of our past; to watch the first dawning upon an eager people of "the happy, heavenly vision men call Art"; to observe closely and to set down with an honest hand our foremost illustrations of the Rise of Poetry in America. Such is my purpose, and I deem it not a mean one. We think of power and wealth as things in themselves, but they are strong and rich only in their relations to the life of man. The essential part of that life is in his spirit, of which imagination is the king, — and the sister arts, with poetry at their front, are to be accounted its highest forms of expression.

The author's purpose.

The song of a nation is accepted as an ultimate test of the popular spirit; as the earliest form of speech and the ripest, — whether the utterance of feelings common to all, or of the fine and daring speculations of the noblest minds. Examine it, and form opinions of the country's general literature, of the hold upon art and action and scientific achievement. If we have

National song.

CA. "Victorian Poets": p. 1.

seen a true poetic movement in America, we may be sure that we have had marches in other fields of progress. The inquiry concerning the genuineness and value of such a movement affords a title to this work, and a review of the conditions that have helped or hindered it must be included. Upon the method chosen for a study of the recent period in England, my present researches are devoted chiefly to the careers and productions of leading poets whose reputations are long-established, and who, upon the whole, fairly represent the various tendencies of American song. And thus, incidentally and with fresh opportunities, we may extend our knowledge of "the aim and province of the art of Poetry," and obtain under a new atmosphere further illustrations of the poetic temperament and life.

Suggestion to the reader.

The subject cannot be lightly entered upon, and as if for entertainment merely. Properly considered, there is no more suggestive undertaking than to review the first displays of lyrical genius in a land as notable as any upon earth. These may seem crude and familiar to ourselves, and possibly are not fully estimated by older nations whose very age and glory make them self-contained. But, if the future is to have a greatness of its own, a study of New World poetry is of equal importance with that devoted to the earlier or contemporary verse of the mother-land. The reader, then, will do well to bear with the details of a prefatory analysis, though they lack that interest which adheres to the lives and works of the various poets to whom his attention will be invited. The points which I shall make will not be wholly novel, but by grouping them newly, and in a logical manner, we may get some notion of the real quality

very cause and foundation of these essays, and if I did not perceive this fact I should have no excuse for their general endeavor. It is true that a nation's literature will not appear out of season. Poetry, its most spontaneous form, is a growth rather than an artifice, or it does not come to strengthen and to stay. Let me acknowledge, as heretofore, the bearing of the conditions under which it is produced, and that a poet must be viewed in the light and shadow of his environment; furthermore, that when a time is ripe there are found both idealists and men of action to represent it,—springing up as when, in the physical world, the pines and fir-trees of a virgin forest have been cleared away, and a novel flora suddenly appears, whose germs have been hidden in the undermould, awaiting their own season of room and light and air. But let me also, and at present no less than in our foreign excursions, include a factor which the new criticism often overlooks. Too little allowance is made for the surprises of genius. We forget that now and then some personage comes without a summons, like a stray leader from the skies; that works appear under adverse circumstances, so new, so strong, so revolutionary, as to seem inspired creations,—men and works that overleap the stages of development, that demand the spiritual factor, the personal equation, the allowance for exception, in the problem of national growth. In the absence of a sunlit atmosphere, they shine by inward light, and communicate heat and lustre to their surroundings. When a link in the chain of evolution is missing, such are the forces that make up for it. But there are other forces, and certain modes of intellectual effort, which assist growth and somewhat forestall the ordinary process. Even criticism may do a share, and

*Law of
environ-
ment;*

*and the
factors
which
modify its
effect.*

*Matters
first to be
considered.*

often by penetrative study of the leaders that reflect or stimulate the various tendencies of a people's ideality. Of course a poet must represent his age and habitat; a Grecian temple beside an Alleghanian trout-brook might be lovely, but surely would be out of place and date. It is now my province to discover what special aids the poets of America have experienced, and what hindrances. In no modern country has ideality been more retarded than in our own; and I think that certain restrictions have peculiarly limited production in the field of Poetry, — the chief of imaginative arts. Yet I see that, in spite of these, the ultimate rise of an American school of poetry was swift and strong, and that its chiefs have had their aids no less than their obstacles, and have bravely confronted the latter. And thus we are brought directly to the preliminary issue.

II.

*Question of
a Home-
School and
its charac-
teristics.*

MUCH has been written of late upon the topic of our native literature. Is there a distinctly American school? If not, when and where shall we look for one? What are, or should be, its special characteristics? These and similar questions are frequently and somewhat vaguely discussed.

*Essential
quality.*

Now, it is first to be observed that the radical quality of any national school, in any country or period, does not wholly depend upon the types, personages, localities, and other materials utilized by its artists and men of letters; and this is especially true with regard to the work of a poet, in distinction from that of a painter. The specific tone of the former artist is not derived from the images which his genius informs with life, and from the plots that serve

his expression of the thought, passion, imagination, of his people and time. Mere reliance upon these will not suffice. Even a painter might devote his life to copying the groups he finds in his own streets, the streets themselves, and the fields and woods beyond them, yet not produce an original art, nor execute it in a fresh and native way. The mere dialect and legends of a province or section are powerless to convey their essential quality to the song of a poet who calls them to his aid. Mr. Grant White, therefore, was perfectly right when he suggested, for these and other reasons, that it is the spirit, not the letter, which giveth life; that we must pay regard to the flavor, rather than to the form and color, of the fruit, — to the distinctive character, not the speech and aspect, of the personage. Unless the feeling of our home-poet be novel, his vision a fresh and distinctive vision, — unless these are radically different from the French, or German, or even the English feeling and vision, — they are not American, and our time has not yet come.

R. G.
White, in
the N. Y.
Times,
Feb. 1,
1880.

But I am not with this distinguished writer in his further claim that we still are essentially English, and shall be so for a long series of years to come; that our literature, like the language we inherit, is wholly English, and must remain so for centuries, until "Anglo-Saxon and Hollander and German and Irishman and negro and Chinese shall have so blended their blood . . . that from the fusion a new race shall have sprung." What I first call to mind is that there are few Americans, even those of but one remove, who are not instantly recognized abroad as being very different from Englishmen, not only with respect to feature, mould, and speech, — which vary according to the sections from which they come, — but in their senti-

A reservation.

"The
Scarlet
Letter."

*A distinctive
national
character.*

ment, modes of thought and feeling, and way of looking at things. In both outward and inward traits they are pronounced distinctively un-English and "American," however divided among themselves. Again, by so much as the style is the man, I believe that the literary product of this new people differs from the literary product of the English, or any other people of the Old World, and I hope to make that difference clear in the course of these chapters. And I will remark, in passing, that "The Scarlet Letter," a romance which Mr. White cited in illustration, to me appears thoroughly un-English in its mystical temper, and its undertone and atmosphere; if not broadly American, it is locally so, — the fruit and out-giving of the New England sentiment that brooded in its author's spirit, and of which it is a soul-wrought witness and dramatic chronicle.

In fine, recognizing the error of those who, by a forced effort, would anticipate creations that will come only of themselves, or through the natural impulse of foreordained artists, I also perceive that already, in various walks of art, and in none more than in that to which our present study is devoted, we have exhibited the new and broad results, both of acclimation and of a blending process, to which the ruling divisions of our population thus far have been subjected. Equally obvious are the minor distinctive phases, which, on the other hand, arise from the differentiation of the American people by influences that, in widely separated districts, have acted upon their inhabitants from the early settlements to the present time. The first-named phenomena are national, while those of the latter class may be termed sectional; but all are American, whether they appertain to the whole,

The type first suggested, that of a broadly national character, is plainly incomplete, and has wide room for maturer development. Let us measure it only at its worth. A restless and ill-adjusted spirit still pervades the heterogeneous elements of our nationality. Here is a country as large as all Europe, embracing zones as far apart, in physical attributes, as those of Norway and Sicily. Here are the emigrants or descendants of every people in Europe, — to go no farther, — and all their languages, and customs, and traditions, and modes of feeling, at one time or another, have come with them. Hence our unconscious habitude of variety, the disinclination to cling to one way of life or thought until its perfect conclusion. There is a ferment in new blood. The American travels, and at first is delighted with the color and flavor of the region to which he has come, but soon wearies of them, and pushes on to some new place where novel characteristics can be enjoyed. This is observable of all Anglo-Saxons, capricious yet steadfast as they are, but more so among ourselves than with respect to our British kinsmen. America has absorbed the traits of many lands and people; the currents still set this way; our modern intercourse with the world at large is close and unintermitting, so that the raw ingredients of our national admixture are supplied quite as rapidly as the whirl and stir of the popular system can triturate and commingle them. It is too much, then, to expect that our art or song, from whatever section either may come, will exhibit a quality specifically American in the sense that the product of Italy is Italian, or that of France is French. At this distance, we who watch others as we are watched ourselves can readily see that the same causes which make

Its incompleteness must be acknowledged.

The national elements:

*To what
extent ho-
mogene-
ous?*

*A recog-
nizable
type.*

*Foreign
criticism.*

ing the politics, manners, dress, art, and letters of the several European countries, — and this, however distinct their nationalities, in proportion to the growth of travel and interculture. But the United States are homogeneous in what pertains to the language and methods of their master-race, and to this extent their homogeneity is definitely assured. Concerning the primal influences that affect the general tone of art and literature, mutual communication and understanding are so perfect that any changes or advances are almost simultaneous throughout our territory. This being the situation, foreign critics are not far wrong in requiring that our home-product shall differ from their own; that it shall be, at least, un-European, — manifestly of the New World, and not of the Old. Return to a consideration of the family likeness, physical and mental, which instantly is apparent to others as we visit the mother-land. If we ourselves are unconscious of it, or wonted to it; if the air and fashion that we display seem to us imperceptible or of small account, they are not so regarded by our kinsmen, or by the guest who lands upon these shores. The stranger quickly perceives, and holds at its value, the general, the national, type. Material and psychological changes are correlative, and almost equally sure of external recognition.

So far, therefore, from demanding absolute novelty in structure, language, or theme, of our home-poet, it is the duty of the critic to value the Americanism which great and small have displayed in quality of tone, and in faithful expression of the dominant popular moods. Thus considered, it will be found they have not fallen short. Those arbiters of foreign taste

who do not acknowledge this may be suspected of some

and ripe as England, however affectionate, can look with perfect complacency upon a daughter growing to her own height and beauty before the world. To her eyes the maiden is still a child, and she owns with reluctance and very slowly that child's attractiveness and the claims of her suitors. One by one the points of youth and inferiority, brought against America, have worn away, and now, when so many of us grant England this last defence of her supremacy, it is with the respect due a mother, and with a courtesy perchance no less insincere than her avowal. The new Americanism is not so modest as to surrender any freehold or to be unconscious of its smallest advantages.

The less essential novelties of structure, theme, and dialect already are discernible in the yield that represents our territorial subdivision. The local flavor of our *genre* and provincial literature has long been unquestioned, but our conceit was not overfed by an acknowledgment almost wholly due to grotesque and humorous exploits, — a welcome such as a prince in his breathing-hour might give to a new-found jester or clown. American poetry, however, has not represented the popular life of our continental slopes and corners merely in their coarser traits. These sections are not so isolated as the Scottish highlands, or as those mountain nooks in Italy, where peasant women contentedly whirl the spindle, and never visit the plains that glisten below; yet some of them are long-settled and have an abiding population, with habits more or less confirmed. Where there is the least of change and interruption, and the colonial blood is most unmixed, the national *ennui* does not prevail; the sentiment and instinct of the people, if limited, are clearly understood and have been fairly expressed

*Minor
character-
istics.*

*The new
Americanism.*

In a certain sense, it is natural for the citizen of so vast and various a country to find his patriotism and his gift of expression respond most easily to the appeals of his own locality. There is still a lagging behind full nationality, just as Federal supremacy, in the hearts of a great multitude, gives precedence to "state rights." Yet there are signs of growth toward an imagination in keeping with our political enlargement. The new Americanism, with relation to literature and the arts of beauty and construction, is seen in the very search for it, in the closer inspection of our own ground, in our more realistic method, in the genuine quality of our modern poetry and creative prose, so much more indigenous than the work of the Neo-Romantic English school, and presenting so fresh a contrast to the poetry and prose of our early periods; finally, in the greater value set upon our home-workers, upon our ventures for ourselves. It is curious to note the minor symptoms of this change. As time has lessened our yearning for the mother-country, native Americans less fondly cling to the old words and traditions. The landlords who cater to foreign or provincial guests still give English and French names to their hotels, and a fresh English colony, after the manner of our ancestors, calls its village Rugby; but the reproach of this barrenness of nomenclature is fast passing away, and the time has come when the declaration of our independence may be made to include the fields of literature and art.

Republicanism in these respects is on trial.

And indeed, if art, under the free system of a democracy, does not show in time as proud a result — whether in the product of its disciples or in the wealth of its libraries and museums — as in countries where it is fed by governmental patronage and sub-

sities, then our republicanism, upon its æsthetic side, is itself a failure. So far as poetry is concerned, I see that we have already had the first period of what may be called, for want of a better term, a true American school. I see that this school was slow to rise, until suddenly a number of its leaders appeared at once ; that its first 'tuneful season has been completed, so that, in the temporary pause, we now, for the first time, may honestly recount its triumphs. But that our lyrical product has not been so obvious as our material grandeur, that it has put on a national type less complete than the types of various sections, that it has been but a delightful promise of what a new song will create for us when poetry comes in vogue again throughout the world,—this, too, is not to be gainsaid. Before examining what we have done, let us see what we have not been able to do until recently, and what not at all. It is time to indicate the early and later restrictions that have hemmed in the poets, and limited the poetry, of the Western world.

III.

THE poets themselves, naturally, would be slow to perceive the causes of their difficulties. The brain is not always conscious of its own *malaise*. Nevertheless, I think that to each true singer, as he arrived at a period when his intellectual faculty sought the rationale of his successes and failures, the facts have been more or less apparent. The idealism of this people was long retarded by certain interdicts, and at last forced its way to expression under very baffling and perplexing conditions, some of which are even now felt. So far as the embarrassments pecul-

*Early and
later Re-
strictions
of the
American
poets.*

*The first
two hun-
dred years.*

iar to the new epoch are involved, it was a perception of these that led me to observe their bearing on the poets of England, before venturing to write upon our own. To these matters I shall again refer, after some mention of the absolute barriers which shut out the Muses from these shores until so late a time.

For two centuries, in truth, the situation here was so adverse to art, and especially to song, as to nullify even our complement to Taine's theory; to stifle, or to divert to other than ideal uses,¹ any exceptional genius that existed, and that would have made its way against restrictions not of themselves quite as exceptional. The modified results of this situation may still be observed. As a rider to all I have said of the essential superiority of art to its materials, we must not fail, also, to consider the repugnance of the general mind to disassociate things and ideas, — to separate the spirit of a work from what is used for its construction. There is a natural expectation that the art of a country will convey to us something of the national history, aspect, social law. On the whole, it has been the instinct of masters to avail themselves, so far as might be, in their plots, manners, and scenery, of the region nearest them; a wise instinct, through which they reach closely to nature, and are more sure to make their work of interest elsewhere and afterward. Shakespeare's men are apt to be Englishmen, though they may figure in Illyria

¹ I am not considering the question whether a poet of the first rank may, or may not, find his natural vocation under the most adverse conditions, and overcome them; but am trying to see why a general poetic movement, embracing many true poets, was deferred until Longfellow, Poe, Whittier, Emerson, Lowell, Whitman, and others of their generation appeared almost simultaneously.

or Rome. Nor is it entirely through unfairness and caprice that the free range allowed to English poets has been denied our own. The Old World has drawn its countries together, like elderly people in a tacit alliance against the strength of youth which cannot return to them, the fresh, rude beauty and love which they may not share. There is, also, something worth an estimate in the division of an ocean gulf, that makes us like the people of a new planet; and when those on the other side hear us sounding the changes upon familiar themes, with voices not unlike their own, they well may feel as if the highest qualities of our song were not full compensation for its lack of "something rich and strange." A response may fairly be expected to the search for novelty, to the curious yearning of those who look to us from across the seas.

Here begin the special restrictions of an American poet. He represents, it is true, the music and ardor of a new country, of a land his race has peopled for two hundred and fifty years, a nation that has completed its first century. A new land, a new nation, yet not forced, like those which have progressed from barbarism to a sense of art, to create a language and literature of their own; a new land with an old language, a new nation with all the literature and traditions behind it of the country from whose colonies it has sprung. While the thought and learning of this people began in America just where it had arrived in the mother-land at the dates of the Jamestown and Plymouth settlements, the physical state and environment of Americans were those of men who find themselves encountering the primitive nature of a savage world. with this difference that

*Novelty of
the situa-
tion.*

The "Colonial" restriction:

its dissimilar effects upon Poetry and Painting.

riginal race, but with the logic, courage, experience, of the civilization behind them. All the drags, the anchorage, the limitations, involved in the word "colonial" retarded a new ideality. The colonial restriction has been well determined. It made the western lyre, until the period covered by this survey, a mechanism to echo, without fresh and true feeling, notes that came from over sea. It so occupied this people with a stern, steadfast, ingenious, finally triumphant contest with Nature that their epic passion was absorbed in the clearing of forests, the bridging of rivers, the conquest of savage and beast, the creation of a free government; and this labor is not yet ended, — it goes on with larger cohorts and immensely widening power. But the imagination never dies, and when our first leisure came for its exercise it was awakened by contact with the nature thus tamed, — by communion with the broadest panorama of woods and hills and waters, under the most radiant skies, that civilized man has ever found himself confronting. Pioneers in art and poetry here caught their inspiration, and naturally the field of painting was the first to give token of novel results. The very ease with which books containing the world's best literature were obtainable in the backwoods made our early writers copyists. The painters, meanwhile, had to lament the absence of galleries in this country, and their own inability to go abroad and study. Thrown upon themselves, and deficient in technical knowledge, they sought for models in the nature about them; and thus began our landscape-school of painting, the work of which, however rude and defective, was more original than the verse wherewith it was contemporary.

A poet of the first rank is not given to every coun-

try, nor to every age. But poets of gifts approaching those of our living favorites doubtless have been born in America, according to Nature's average, at different times of our history. Until recently, the stimulants of their genius must have been wanting. It may be that the people had no real need of them, and song and art, like invention, come not without necessity. What poetry was latent here and there does not concern us. The stone on which our colonial life was founded was frigid as an arctic boulder, — there was no molecular motion to give out life and heat. Who were the mute, inglorious Miltons? Of what kind is the verse that was produced? Does it move us? Is it poetry? However fine the cast of individuals, the effect of a perpetual contest with the elemental, often sinister, always gigantic forces of a new continent would be so adverse to art, so directly in the line of necessity and temporal gain, as to stifle their poetic fire, to develop a heroism that was stolid and unimaginative, to mark persons and communities with sternness and angularity, leading them to a homely gauge of values, not wont to esteem the ideal at its true worth. The aspiration of a refined nature would seem to the multitude foolishness and a stumbling-block. For a prolonged season the art of writing verse was almost solely a luxury of the professional classes in America, and its relics bear witness to their pedantry and dulness. It is not to the wiggled and gowned that we instinctively listen for the music and freedom of creative song. And if poetry even in England, from the middle of the seventeenth century to the close of the eighteenth, stupidly fashioned itself upon the models of worn-out schools, how should it do more in England's colonies, that brought hither certain shoots of taste and

Latent genius not to be considered.

Colonial pedantry.

learning from the Old World, and found it hard to protect them at all in the sterile wild-woods of the New?

*Prolonged
sterility.*

Such was the nature of the barriers which, in the early and later colonial periods, absolutely defied the overleaping of a single notable poet. We find little of more significance in the transition era of the Revolution, although a nation took on life. No poetry was begotten in the rage of that heroic strife; its humor, hatred, hope, suffering, prophecy, were feebly uttered, as far as verse was concerned, in the mode and language inherited years before from the coarsest English satirists. There came at last a time when the nation felt itself in vigorous youth, and began to have a song. Some few original notes were heard among our pipings. The positive barriers were broken, and in their stead came the restrictions that are felt in some degree down to the present time.

*The first
stages of
Republicanism
opposed to
ideal art.*

At the outset it may be said of Republicanism itself—in which our pride and faith are based, and which we trust is ultimately to promote a literature and an art not below the standard of our bravest hope—that it originally somewhat lessened the ardor of our poets, or kept this within temperate bounds. There was a craving for ideality of a certain kind, and in our liberal regions the sense of utility was not the sole controlling power. There was a wide manifestation of that which bears to pure ideality an inferior relationship. Our system diffused the intelligence which lifts our people quite above the dulness and stolidity of the middle classes elsewhere, but did not speedily bring them to the pitch of high emotion.

A leveller.

It is a leveller, and in its early stages raises a multitude to the level of the commonplace; so that there

The general independence and comfort have not bred those dramatic elements which imply conditions of splendor and squalor, glory and shame, triumph and despair. In their stead we have the spirit of the American homesteads, and the loss to the artist of some darker contrast, that would make their virtue and piety more inspiring, certainly is their gain. In no other country are there so many happy little households, — although there is a curious foreign belief to the contrary, derived from travelling acquaintanceship. This must be so in the one land where every man can own a portion of the soil and be a freeholder, and where a man's toil meets no doubtful reward. The popular thrift and freedom, joined with the necessity for labor to steadily maintain them, are not at first productive of the tragic or entrancing dreams of effective art. Wisely bettering their material chances, men are too busy to feel a spiritual want. And the labor of our representative men is so extended and heroic as of itself to feed the popular imagination. In default of Homer, we at least have Hector and Achilles; and the peerless exploits of our engineers, capitalists, discoverers, speak louder than a minstrel's words. In all this amazing drama of triumphant effort and organization; in the adjustment of our political theory, dependent on statesmanship, and leading to oratory and journalism rather than to art and song; in the despotism of our social unwritten law that an American must be a good citizen first of all, and that the first duties of a citizen are to rear and maintain a family; in the implied doubt as to the sanity of enduring privations for the sake of the ideal, when, by deserting it, a practical success may be had, — amid all this the man of genius has too often betaken himself to the work of his neighbors, and those who keep

The American homestead.

Material effort.

*Diffusion
of the com-
monplace.*

faith with the Muse have found themselves perplexed and out of time. Nevertheless, I repeat that, up to a certain grade, our people have required their poetry, — just as they will have their votes, their seats in church, their county papers, and the piano or melodeon in every house. A throng of minor singers have answered to the demand with very natural and unaffected voices. The select few, whose efforts placed them above their comrades, often have suffered from the undue favor awarded their minor and ordinary productions.

These adverse influences, belonging to the soil and air, perhaps have not been so directly comprehended by the American poet as the obvious and technical impediments which had force when he essayed a sustained and novel work.

*Technical
difficulties;
which,
however,
do not
greatly af-
fect the lyr-
ic poet.*

In considering these, let us acknowledge that they do not greatly concern the emotional and lyric poet. He is at no loss for a method or a theme; the latter is at once the cause and modulator of his song. Personal joys and griefs, special occurrences in history or related to the individual life, — these have inspired, and do inspire, the briefer poems, the lyrics which still make up the choicest portion of our verse. Their range is wide, from the simple fireside ballad to the impassioned ode, and my estimate of their remarkable freshness and variety will be given more fully hereafter. At present I would say that among them are many admirable of their kind, and that the relative number of these is not less than can be found in the popular verse of other lands. An American critic fails in discernment or independence who does not see this and avow it.

To what

But while the lyrical songster need not cast about

to write, — for his heart has already moved him, — the ambitious poet is best equipped for a larger effort by some adequate theme awaiting his hand. The moment arrives when poets of the upper cast desire to forego their studies and brief lyrical flights, and to produce the composite and heroic works that rank as masterpieces. These leaders often have been arrested, with respect to romantic or invehtive structures, by a scarcity of home-themes, no less than by the lack of sharp dramatic contrast in our equable American life. I am aware that this statement frequently is derided, and that many poets, while realizing that their product is too meagre, will not acknowledge its force. Others, and these among our foremost, who have thought to analyze their experience, confess that it is true in no small measure, and have stated this over their own hands.

*more ambitious
have felt
their
weight.*

Up to a recent date, absence of theme for a national masterpiece, for a work belonging to our own atmosphere and history, has been a result of the condition under which we started. Original art is long deferred among a people cultured at the outset. A writer has well said that "the cause of the absence of the legendary and poetic in our early history may be attributed to the mental development of the colonists, who had already passed through that historic stage." They started at once with both church and school-house. The imagination was controlled by precedent, and "Art was cheated of its birthright." They made little history in a dramatic sense. What there was of the poetic or wondrous in their arduous compelling life had a local range, — such as the trials for witchcraft, finely utilized by New England's great romancer, and too inadequately, it must be owned, by her most famous poet. In Park-

*Primitive
absence of
theme.*

*Otis, in
"Sacred
and Con-
structive
Art."*

"*Evangeline*."

*Indistinct
back-
ground.*

man's elegant survey of certain picturesque epochs in colonial history, the feminine element, essential to complete dramatic quality, is usually wanting ; in other annals, like those of Spanish-American adventure, it scarcely appears at all. American antiquity is a rude settler's antiquity ; a homely fashion that palls, because not long out of date ; a story everywhere the same, — furnishing at times the basis of some exquisite idyl, like "*Evangeline*," but for none too many of the class. "*Evangeline*" still remains the most notable of the longer American poems ; and how much of that is otherwise than scenic and idyllic, and how much of it does not fit the story to the landscape, rather than the landscape to the story ? No material, no stirring theme, with all your freedom, your conquest, your noble woods and waters, your westward spread of men ! These are motives, accessories, atmosphere, often grander in magnitude than elsewhere to be found, but not perforce more new. The poetic instinct does not always hold the macrocosm superior to the microcosm, the prairie to the plain of Marathon, the Hudson to the Cephissus or the Tweed. As for latter-day history, this is not far enough removed. From the Revolution to the Civil War, the incidents of our life and passion are so recent and so plainly recorded as to gather no luminous halo from the too slight distance at which we observe them. The true poet will profit by them to the uttermost ; the limits are to be overcome, but still are limits and in his way. He is thrown upon the necessity of inventing dramatic themes for the broader range of poetic venture. This the great poets always have avoided, for the product of such invention usually has seemed artificial and remote from human concern.

LACK OF BACKGROUND.

Bear in mind, also, that our wide-awake people are removed, not only from the superstitions that were a religion to our forefathers, but from the wondercraft and simple faith prevailing among the common folk of other lands than our own. The beautifying lens of fancy has dropped from our eyes. Where are our forest and river legends, our Lorelei, our Venusberg, our elves and kobolds? We have old-time customs and traditions, and they are quaint and dear to us, but their atmosphere is not one in which we freely move. Just so with our heroism. No national changes and struggles have been of more worth than our own, but critics are not far wrong who point out that, however lofty the action and spirit of our latest crisis, heroism is not with us so much the chief business that one must be always "enthusiastic and on guard." One of our poets aims to be especially national. He sings, upon theory, as the American bard must sing when the years have died away. The result is a striking assumption of what can only come of itself, and after long time be past; a disjointed series of kaleidoscopic pieces, not constituting a master-work, but, with all their strength and weakness, as unsatisfactory as the ill-assorted elements which he strives to represent. Yet, even in this effort, he is representative and a personage of mark, if not precisely in the direction of his own choice and assurance.

More clearly to understand how far, and in what way, our poets have felt the lack of background, of social contrasts, and of legendary and specific incident, we may observe the literature of some region where different conditions exist. In an isolated country of established growth and quality, a native genius soon discovers his tendency and proper field.

Look at Scotland. Her national melodies were

An illustration by contrast.

ready and waiting for Burns ; her legends, history, traditions, for Walter Scott. The popular tongue, costumes, manners, all distinctively and picturesquely her own, affect the entire outcome of her song and art. Embraced in English literature, her literature is so un-English that it affords the paradigm we need. Enter the cathedral in Glasgow. Within the last thirty years that edifice has been refitted throughout with stained glass, contributed by the ancient families and clans. What associations are called up by the devices upon the windows in the chancel and nave, and in the impressive crypt below ! Among all the shields and names, — those of Sterling, Hay, Douglas, Montrose, Campbell, Montgomerie, Lawrie, Buccleuch, Hamilton, — not one that is not utterly, purely Scottish. Even in our oldest and most characteristic sections in Virginia or New England, influences like these are discovered to no such extent. In a certain sense, they are not only influences, but aids : they move, they stimulate, they belong to the life and memory of the native poet, and he avails himself of them without effort or consciousness. Not that they are the essential, the imperative aids. But to be without them is a restriction, and one which our first genuine school of poets has had more or less to endure.

The poet's food and fame.

Strange, indeed, if the material wants of New World life, its utilitarian test of values, and the general conditions of a primitive democracy had not forced our early idealists into a struggle for existence which even the sturdiest found it hard to prolong. Two things are essential to the poetic aspiration that results in fine achievement : the sympathetic applause

his work. The rewards of authorship have been sufficiently doubtful and varying in times before our own. In older lands, the poet, like his predecessor the minstrel, was at least protected and nourished by the good or great to whom he dedicated his song. Happily this kind of support was from the first impracticable in a liberal republic. But it long was impossible, on material grounds alone, — although enthusiasts might attempt to live upon love and fame — that any vigorous and prevailing flood of poesy should be sustained in toiling, practical, frugal America. We now know that in art, as in life, ideal productiveness follows, and does not precede, material security and wealth. The most creative eras of historic lands were those when their cities were the richest, when their galleons sought out distant ports, and their nobles and burgesses, sure of life's needs, craved for the luxuries of taste and emotion. Literature thrives as a means of subsistence, nor is poetry an exception to the rule. The supply answers to the demand. Not long ago in this country, few books, except school-books, were required by the people ; and how should poetry, that looked from the printed page for its welcome and sustenance, be naturally composed ? We are speaking of an ethereal art, but quietly examining the law of its activity.

*Law of
production.*

It is, moreover, in America that the popular instinct, which resists whatever is asserted to be a tax upon knowledge, has worked with peculiar force against the development of a home-school. So long as our purveyors could avail themselves without cost or hindrance of foreign master-works, they scarcely could be expected to risk their means in behalf of native authorship. Pure idealists, men like Poe and

*The copy-
right ques-
tion.*

*International
copyright.*

Until a state of law shall exist that will induce American publishers, driven from their distant foraging-grounds, to seek for genius at home and make it available, the support of our authors will not be so assured as to tend "in the end to the advancement of literature." International copyright at least would have made it feasible for the poet to earn his living by general literary work, and to reserve some heart and thought for his nobler calling. Now, when an organized movement at last seems under way toward copyright reform, it still is so hampered with reservations and class-interests that many ask whether it were not better to have no change at all than to have one that is partial, and that may postpone indefinitely the one thing needful, to wit: honest recognition of an author's right of property in his own creations, without any more limits of space and time than those appertaining to other kinds of estate.

*Disastrous
effect upon
American
literature.*

Literature verily has been almost the sole product of human labor that has not been rated as the lasting property of the producer and his heirs or assigns. This want of permanent copyright has borne severely upon authors in all countries, but most severely upon those of America, who have had to await the formation of public taste, to create their audiences, and who, while willing to suffer in their own persons, are less ready to devote lifetimes to the production of what will be valueless to those whom they hold most dear. The want of international copyright has been a wrong to our brother-writers in Europe. Their complaints are just; their cry has gone up for years. Great as the spoliations have been which they have endured, the effect upon our native literature and authorship has been far more disastrous. Our authors themselves do not comprehend it. A few of the great

publishing houses, grown rich upon the system of free reprints, of late have felt this wrong, and the men of heart and culture who control them are generously atoning for it. We see them leaders in artistic and literary movements, the friends of authors and artists, receiving for their public and private humanities our warmest tributes of honor and affection. It is said that every wrong in this world is surely, if slowly, righted; and the wrongs of authors doubtless will be set right. But who shall pick up water spilled to the ground? The writers of a new generation will never realize how bitter was the bread eaten by those who went before them and made their paths straight.

Critical periods are sometimes uncreative, yet there is little doubt that our poetry has suffered, also, from the lack of those high and exquisite standards of criticism which have been established in older lands. The poet, the artist, alike need the correction of a fine censorship and the tonic of that just appreciation which is the promise of fame. American verse, within recent memory, has experienced, first, a popular favor gained by its weakest and most effeminate sentiment; and, secondly, a rude exaggeration of its defects, a refusal to acknowledge its value as compared with that of the foreign product, or to consider its higher aspirations as practicable and worthy of respect. The people at large have passed from sham emotion to irreverence, and to a relish for what is flippant and ephemeral. Then, too, our most sincere and painstaking authorities often seem at a loss to estimate the nature of art, and criticise it from metaphysical or doctrinarian points of view. The poet or painter feels the wrong and the error, and, though he makes no complaint, they tell upon his buoyancy and application. Only of late have we begun to look for criti-

*Unsat-
isfactory
tests of
merit.*

*Criticism
as it should
be.*

cism which applies both knowledge and self-knowledge to the test ; which is penetrative and dexterous, but probes only to cure ; which enters into the soul and purpose of a work, and considers every factor that makes it what it is ;— the criticism which, above all, esteems it a cardinal sin to suffer a verdict to be tainted by private dislike, or by partisanship and the instinct of battle with an opposing clique or school. Such criticism is now essayed, but often is too much occupied with foreign or recondite subjects to search out and foster what is of worth among ourselves.

IV.

*These local
and primitive
difficulties are
now succeeded by
the general
restrictions of the
new era.*

THESE, it seems to me, have been the local and organic difficulties with which the American poet, wittingly or unwittingly, has had to contend. They are not figments of the brain ; their force has been real ; time and national development alone have lessened them ; during the continuation of their serious pressure the rise of poetry was delayed. It is curious to note that, just as their adverse influence began to pass away, a new class of restrictions came in play throughout the enlightened world, affecting our own idealists in common with those of the mother-land. When I long since began to think of the present work, I saw that the modern intellectual change was so absolute that I was compelled to seek for the general conditions of the period, and to attempt a review of the poets of England before entering upon our home-field, in order to comprehend justly the effect of the new atmosphere upon the spirit of poetry itself. In the first chapter of the *Victorian Poets*, certain perplexing elements are considered which have made the recent time one to which a hackneyed word, "transitional,"

is more correctly applied than to any former period. The new learning — the passage from the childlike and phenomenal way of regarding things to the absolute, scientific penetration of their true entities and relations — has directly told upon the work of the poet, requiring new language, imagery, invention, as he adapts himself to a deeper purpose and the hope of a sublimer faith. I have pointed out, as well, the struggles, devices, defeats, and victories of the English minstrels under the stress of latter-day iconoclasm and the invincible demands of modern thought; taking into account, also, the minor and obvious forces antagonistic to a devoted pursuit of the ideal, — among the rest the world's material activity, displayed in labor, invention, construction, — the world's realistic eagerness, that makes of the newspaper, the novel, and the bulletins of science the food and outlets of the imagination, and renders mankind intent alone upon each day's labor, so to hasten on the golden year. Reluctant to confront these ceaseless and perturbing manifestations, until out of them the world shall have derived a more assured philosophy, many of the latest singers have ignored them altogether: the weaker busying themselves with mere dilettantism and the technique of their vocation, the nobler being devoted to the worship of beauty pure and simple, and often going back to its early revelations and the antique forms.

V.

THESE generic burdens of the age itself have borne even more severely upon American idealists than upon their transatlantic brethren. Yet it was when they first began to have their weight, and not until then,

Cp. "Victorian Poets": pp. 7-21.

Down at last.

*Special advantages
of our
home-poets.*

*American
landscape.*

*National
feeling.*

that the true light of Poetry in America ventured to appear. Under the very shadow of the whirlwind it brightened into dawn. Possibly the new learning was most of all needed here, as an offset to puritanism, superstition, and sentimentalism in its mawkish forms. Honest fact and a search for our own resources gave an impulse to healthy inspiration. But the opportunity for the achievements of our leading poets, so famous and beloved in their hoary years, really came when the specific restrictions, to which so much space has been here devoted, at last yielded measurably to time and national progress. Coincidentally with their decline, certain positive aids to our lyrical genius became apparent, and were felt, and aroused to joyous activity its instinct, courage, and imagination.

First of all, as I have shown, the American with an eye for natural beauty, led by his seclusion to close and musing observation, had a subject for poetic expression in the landscape of the New World, by turns impressive, bewildering, reposeful, but always beautiful and strong. If its primeval aspect stupefied the toiling settlers, while its grandeur seemed to belittle humanity and to defer the proper study of mankind, it afterward compelled our ideal recognition, and inspired the early and reverent anthems of the father of our choir. Next, and most vital of the elements required for the promotion of a home-school, a national feeling grew up when the compactness and growth of the United States, as a nation, became assured. Half a century was needed to bring this feeling to the blossoming form of art. Meanwhile, it had been strengthening and finding expression in other ways ; for example, in the patriotic eloquence which marked our oratory, and which warmed the blood and stirred the impulse of many a poetic youth, as he read

in his school-books the speeches of the founders and preservers of liberty. Hence our strongest emotional traits, — love of freedom, hatred of oppression, respect for ancestral faith, the sense of independence which makes an American stand erect and believe himself the peer of any man, the audacity and ambition found among no other people ; finally, an adventurous habit of experimenting without much regard to precedent or training. Out of some of these traits came, it is true, a commonplace and widely scattered product in literature. But if a host of writers ended in mediocrity, this, too, was in the order of evolution. The feeble books of one generation are often horn-books for the people, the promise and cause of better work in the next. The late Civil War was not of itself an incentive to good poetry and art, nor directly productive of them. Such disorders seldom are ; action is a substitute for the ideal, and the thinker's or dreamer's life seems ignoble and repugnant. But we shall see that the moral and emotional conflicts preceding the war, and leading to it, were largely stimulating to poetic ardor ; they broke into expression, and buoyed with earnest and fervid sentiment our heroic verse. Lastly, it must be observed that, about the time from which I date the appearance of a group of noteworthy poets, a material support was afforded to ideal work. Both artists and writers began to be paid, and found their respective gifts to some extent a means of subsistence. American publishers, as I have said, took heart, and made ventures in behalf of our own literature. Journalism also lent its aid, paying critical attention to native authors, and enabling not a few of them to gain a foothold by labor upon the great newspapers and magazines. All these aids, I repeat, came into service after the scientific

*Growth of
the mar-
ket.*

*Advent of
a true po-
etic school.*

restraint of the modern period began to have weight. They assisted us to bear up against it, and alleviated the special restrictions of an earlier time. The sweet and various measures of a band of genuine singers at length were heard, and found an audience in whatsoever regions know the English tongue. American poetry took its place in literature, and entered upon a first term, now brought to an end, and constituting the main field of this review.

CHAPTER II.

GROWTH OF THE AMERICAN SCHOOL.

I.

HAVING given an outline of the situation which rendered the new country, in the earlier periods of settlement, an untoward region for the pursuit of song, and also of the specific aids which at last have enabled America to have some voice and inspiration of her own, I now wish to glance at the actual record of her lyrical exploits that culminated with the rise of the group of poets to whom this work is chiefly devoted. To do this minutely would require us to travel over dreary wastes indeed, though gaining rest at last upon the borders of a land of promise. From what has been written, I shall rightly be understood to agree with Mr. Whipple in his statement that the course of our literature has been, upon the whole, subsidiary to the general movement of the American mind; that our imagination has found exercise in the subjugation of a continent, in establishing liberty, in war, politics, and government, — above all, in the inventive and constructive energy and the financial boldness needed to develop and control the material heritage which has fallen to us. But to this let me add that the course of our poetry, for the same reasons, was long subsidiary to the course of other literature, — at once, or by turns, to our theological, political, and educational achievements in prose, and

*A retrospective
summary:
1607-1860.*

*"The First
Century of
the Republic":
Harper's
Mag., 1876.*

*Authori-
ties.*

to those in the departments of historical narrative and romance.

The means for a survey of the early waste, and of its few and unimportant oases, are to be found in the libraries of collectors, and in the compilations of the Duyckincks, Griswold, and others, who have made for us as cheery a showing as they could. But a reader who has not access to the rare books of a succession of by-gone authors gains with more satisfaction a correct idea of their worth and purport by the study of such a work as Professor Tyler's "History of American Literature." He well may avail himself, so far as it is completed, of a critical digest whose facts will not be gainsaid, a clear and wholesome exposition of our early literature, presenting judgments and inferences with which he usually must be in accord. It is a result of scholarly labor, closely examining the field, and failing not to detect whatever may be found of value in those new plantations. Can this mould of the Colonial period be touched with the sunlight of to-day? Can these dry bones live? Yes, under the hands of a man with the patience, enthusiasm, and kindly humor of their historian, to whom American literature is so indebted for this review of its progress that his name will be enviably connected with it henceforth.

*Prof.
Moses Coit
Tyler's re-
view of the
Colonial
periods.*

And in the two large volumes, covering our first and second periods, more than a century and a half, — from 1607 to 1765, — the product of the poets appears so valueless and meagre that, if the narrative depended on them alone, there would be no great reason for its compilation. A larger proportion of educated men belonged to the early colonies than is to be

works in London, and afterward by means of the few and meanly furnished presses along this coast. These folk were simply third-rate British rhymesters, who copied the pedantry of the tamest period known. The only marks of distinction between their prose and verse were that, while the former might be dull, the latter must be, and must pay a stilted regard to measure and rhyme. How hard for our amiable historian to make poetical finds that can lighten the pages of his record! How he seizes upon some promising estray, — like the anonymous ode on the death of picturesque Nat. Bacon, like Norton's "Funeral Elegy" upon Mistress Anne Bradstreet, or Urian Oakes's upon Thomas Shepard, — and makes the most of it! Surely a time that fed its imagination with the offerings of the "Tenth Muse," and expressed religious exaltation in those measures of the *Bay Psalm Book* that seem to break from a cow's horn or a Roundhead's nose, and in the lyrical damnations of Michael Wigglesworth, — such a time, from its beginning with George Sandys even to the generation that founded hopes of a native drama upon the genius of Thomas Godfrey, had derived few creative impulses from its own experience, and could give no real intimation of a national future. This was a time which now seems more venerable to us than the daylight eras of ancient civilization, — drearily old-fashioned, like its town halls and college barracks, still remaining, all the older and mouldier because they are not antique. To its very close, when the different colonies began to move toward cohesion, the most of it seems to me night, — utter night. Its poetical relics are but the curios of a museum, — the queer and ugly specimens of an unhistoric age.

Manifestly, and as at a later time, New England

Ode on the Death of Nathaniel Bacon: 1676.

John Norton: 1651-1716.

Urian Oakes: 1631-81.

Anne Bradstreet: 1612-72.

The "Bay Psalm Book": Cambridge, 1640.

Michael Wigglesworth: 1631-1705.

Sandys, the translator of Ovid: 1577-1644.

Thomas Godfrey: 1736-63.

A rayless period.

New Eng-

*land in the
van.*

*The Early
Chroni-
clers.*

*Histori-
ans.*

Divines.

claimed the lead in whatsoever there was of thought, or wit, or fancy ; and Cambridge even then had her poets, who accounted themselves true children of Parnassus. Tyler plainly shows how the feudal policy of dispersion, and a contempt for book-learning as compared with active life, placed a ban upon letters in Virginia ; while the New England policy of numerical and intellectual concentration brought forward the learned men of that region, and made its colonists a literary people from the first. In spite of their moroseness, pedantry, asceticism, a lurking perception of beauty, an æsthetic sensibility, was to be found among them. But the manifest, the sincere genius of the colonies is displayed elsewhere than in their laborious verse. Noble English and a simple, heroic wonder give zest to the writings of the early chroniclers, the annals of discovery and adventure. Such traits distinguish the narratives of the gallant and poetic Captain John Smith, and of Strachey, whose picture of a storm and wreck in the Bermudas so roused the spirit that conceived "The Tempest." They pervade the memorials of Bradford and Winthrop, of Johnson and Gookin, of Francis Higginson and Winslow and William Wood. There are power and imagination in the discourses of the great preachers, — Hooker, Cotton, Roger Williams, Oakes, — who founded a dominion of the pulpit that was not shaken until after the time of Edwards and Byles. Verse-making was but the foible of the colonial New Englanders ; law, religious fervor, superstition, were then the strength of life ; and the time that produced Increase and Cotton Mather fostered a progeny quite as striking and characteristic as the melodists of our late Arcadian morn.

REVOLUTIONARY PERIOD.

ture, it was natural that the chief writers — men of the learned professions, busied in affairs, and already feeling that instinct of government which animates territorial centres — should be publicists, setting forth the principles of order, economy, and social weal. The colonial separation ended; the national movement began with stormy agitation, and progressed to union in council and war. With the Revolution came not only the great orators, but an outburst, otherwise than tuneless, of patriotic ballads, songs, and doggerel satires, — to all of which, at this distance, the sounds of the Continental fife and drum seem a fitting accompaniment. Nor did staid and learned personages disdain to pay homage to the precept of Andrew Fletcher, and to supplement the new-born national ardor by the aid of their muses. Trumbull's *M'Fingal* is a work that will not go quite out of repute. It still speaks well for the character, wit, and facility of the staunch and acute author, and shows genuine originality although written after a model. Not even "Hudibras" more aptly seizes upon the ludicrous phases of a turbulent epoch. In New York, bluff Captain Freneau, mariner, journalist, and poet, proved himself the ready laureate of the war. Read the story of his impetuous life, and look through the collection of his ditties and poems, with their pretentious defects and unwittingly clever touches. A strange and serio-comic medley they are, and no less a varied representation of the poetic standards reached in America a hundred years ago. Among the relics which I call to mind of the jingling verse produced in quantity by Treat Paine and his contemporaries, there is scarcely a lyric that breathes what we now recognize as the essential poetic spirit, excepting five or six of Freneau's, such as "The Wild Honeysuckle," "The Parting Glass,"

*Royall
Tyler :*
1757-1826.

*William
Dunlap :*
1766-1839.

1787-1815.

*Timothy
Dwight :*
1752-1817.

*Joel Bar-
low :* 1755-
1812.

*Patriotic
ditties.*

*A natural
course of
develop-
ment.*

"To a Honey Bee" (which last is good enough to be Landor's), and a delicate little song, by John Shaw, of Maryland, entitled "Who has Robbed the Ocean Cave?" Practical efforts, however, were made in the composition and production of native dramas, by Tyler and Dunlap, — our earliest playwrights, — in Boston and New York respectively.

After the close of the Revolution, and until the War of 1812, the genius of our people was devoted to the establishment, through peaceful labor, of the security and resources which should be the first-fruits of a conflict for independence. Writers occupied themselves with analyzing the science of government, its principles and practice. No American library, however, was complete without copies of Dr. Dwight's historico-didactic masterpiece, *Greenfield Hill*, and Joel Barlow's quarto epic, *The Columbiad*. The popular ear was content with patriotic songs, among them "Hail Columbia," which owed their general adoption, like a successor, "The Star-Spangled Banner," to the music that carried them and to an early possession of the field. It was not until peace, for a second time, became a habit that the imagination of a young people, assured of nationality, slowly found expression upon the written page. In view of the conditions already described, what traits might we reasonably expect would characterize poetic effort at this stage of development?

First, — and although the form and ideal of American verse still should correspond, like all our early fashions, to the modes prevailing in England, — it would seem that, gradually, poets should appear, hampered by this instinct of correspondence, and not quite

all, in a different way from the English; that they should seek for home themes, and study their surroundings, most likely in a doubtful and groping manner; that a diversity of subject, thought, and language should be observed in the distinct sections of the republic, — the poets of the South being more courtly and romantic, and those of the Middle States more national and more upon the search for aboriginal and historical flavor; that local successes should be marked where there was the least inflow of new foreign elements, the sincerest faith, the most intelligent thought; that poetry should be the more learned, the more subtle and earnest, in the scholarly region of the East, and that poets should thrive best there, where the practice of literature had long obtained, — since all forms of art require more time for growth than other products of national organization.

Somewhat after this wise, in fact, as we recur to the earliest promise of an American school, we find that it began with the second quarter of this century. Imaginative youths, born and educated in the new republic, discovered that they were poets, and strove to express the spirit of their birth and training. Among them, Pierpont, Dana, Allston, Sprague, Bryant, — the gentle stars of the East, — began to show their light, and offered their tender or patriotic lyrics, their meditative verse, their placid monographs on the phases of American scenery and tradition. Of these, Bryant was the one whose genius had the elements that give permanence to the work of poets. In the South, a few scattered minstrels, such as Wilde and Pinkney, sang their Lovelace lyrics. Their type has survived, almost to our day. Throughout the swift development of the Northern States, the South — agricultural, feudal, provincial — loyally clung to its eight-

Differentiation.

Earliest promise of a Home-School, 1815-

John Pierpont: 1785-1866.

Richard Henry Dana: 1787-1879.

Washington Allston: 1779-1843.

Charles Sprague: 1791-1875.

Bryant.

Richard Henry Wilde: 1789-1847.

Edward Coats Pinkney: 1802-28.

The South.

*William
Gilmore
Simms :*
1806-70.

*Philip
Pendleton
Cooke :*
1816-50.

Poe.

*James
Abraham
Hillhouse :*
1789-1841.

*John Gar-
diner Cal-
kins*

Brainard :
1796-1828.

*James
Gales
Percival :*
1795-1856.

*Allow-
ances to be
made.*

eenth-century taste, making no intellectual changes so long as human slavery was the basis of its physical life. I shall hereafter refer to the quality of the new-born Southern imagination. That it exists, in fresh and hopeful promise, is now beyond doubt. A few of the earlier Southern writers — one of whom was Simms, the novelist-poet — worked courageously, but with more will and fluency than native power ; so that, in spite of their abundant verse, such a lyrist as Pendleton Cooke was long the typical Southern poet, — a name joined with the memory of a single song. A collection of the earlier Southern poetry worth keeping would be a brief anthology, which a little volume might contain, and in which more than one of Albert Pike's productions certainly should be found. Poe, whose pieces would occupy one third of it, sought the literary market, deserting Richmond and Baltimore for Philadelphia and New York. He lived in the Northern atmosphere, and, like Bryant, took his part in the busy movement of its civic life and work.

Besides the Eastern poets whom I have named, there were others who still more closely followed English models : among them, the orthodox bards of Connecticut, Hillhouse and Brainard, compared with whom Percival, the eccentric scholar and recluse, shines by virtue of a gift improved by no mean culture. His lyrics and poems of nature, though inferior to Bryant's, so resemble them that he would be called the latter's pupil, had not the two composed in the same manner from the outset.

These writers and some others of their time must, in all fairness, be judged by it. They had their modest laurels and rewards, and were the bright selected few of their country and period, — no less distinguished, though within a smaller horizon, than their

latter-day successors. Their work was the best of its kind which America could show; it had the knack of making itself read in the annuals and school-books, and influenced the sentiment of more than one generation. Were Dana and Allston flourishing now, they would accomplish feats then impracticable, and doubtless would be at no disadvantage among our present favorites, nor less receive our honor and support. Fashion is a potency in art, making it hard to judge between the temporary and the lasting. Are we sure that our popular poets are better in native faculty? If they have a finer understanding and a defter handling of their craft, these may be partly a consequence of the fact that not Montgomery and Wilson, but Keats, and Wordsworth, and Tennyson, and their greater masters, have supplied the models of a recent school.

It was natural, also, that the literary centre should shift from place to place, along a sea-board whose capital was scarcely yet defined. New York early drew together a number of bright young wits and songsters. The fame of the prose-romancers, Cooper and Irving, and their success with home themes, were gratifying to the local and national pride, and encouraged at the time, as far as literature was concerned, a broader American sentiment than prevailed in New England. That was a spirited little group of rhyming satirists whose fancy brightened the pages of Coleman's "Evening Post." Two young writers, Halleck and Drake, worked in comradeship until the one sustained a more than common misfortune in the other's untimely death. These two men were real poets; such is the impression left as one reads, after many years, the verse composed by them. Had they been born half a century later, they now would work

New York.

*Cooper and
Irving.*

*"The
Croakers,"
1819-25.*

Pioneers.

*John
Howard
Payne :*
1791-1852.

*Joseph
Rodman
Drake :*
1795-1820.

*Fitz-
Greene
Halleck :*
1790-1867.

more elaborately, but with less certainty of reputation. Their best pieces were at once so received into popular affection that the authors' names still last. Both of these poets had humor, and a perception of its legitimate use. They, with Bryant and his school, — with Brockden Brown, Paulding, Cooper, Irving, and Miss Sedgwick, writers of prose, and the dramatist Payne, author of "Brutus" and other by-gone plays, and of that abiding carol, "Home, Sweet Home," — were the first Americans whose work gave any substantial evidence of a native movement in ideal or creative literature. Drake died in his twenty-sixth year, leaving a daughter, through whom his poetic gift has been transmitted to our day. He had a quick, genuine faculty, and could be frolicsome or earnest at will. As an exercise of that delicate imagination which we term fancy, *The Culprit Fay*, although the work of a youth schooled in fairy-lore and the metres of Coleridge, Scott, and Moore, boded well for his future. "The American Flag" is a stirring bit of eloquence in rhyme. The death of this spirited and promising writer was justly deplored. His talent was healthy; had he lived, American authorship might not so readily have become, in Griswold's time, a vent for every kind of romantic and sentimental absurdity. Drake also would have stimulated the muse of Halleck, whose choicest pieces were composed before he had outlived the sense of that recent companionship. He, too, was a natural lyrist, whose pathos and eloquence were inborn, and whose sentiment, though he wrote in the prevailing English mode, was that of his own land. As we read those favorites of our school-boy days, "Burns" and "Red Jacket" and "Marco Bozzaris," we feel that Halleck was, within his bounds, a national poet. Circumstances dulled his fire, and

he lived to write drivel in his old age. But the early lyrics remain, nor was there anything of their kind in our home-poetry to compete with them until long after their first production.

The impulse given to poetry and belles-lettres by the example of the early poets and novelists increased with the appearance of fresh strivers after literary fame. In the East, names began to be mentioned that now are great indeed; others, then more commonly known, have passed almost out of memory. A few teachers of sound literary doctrine, like E. T. Channing, of Cambridge, were sowing good seed for future harvests. In New York, the writings of Willis and Tuckerman, of the song-makers Hoffman, Morris, and English, of Verplanck, the Duyckincks, Benjamin, Griswold, and other editors and bookwrights, and the parade of new versifiers, male and female, betokened a taste, however crude and ill-regulated, for the pursuit of letters. Occasionally a note of promise was heard, from some quaint genius like Ralph Hoyt, or some aspirant like Lord, of whom great things were predicted, and who, in spite of Poe's vindictive onslaught, was and is a poet. A good deal of eloquent and high-sounding verse was produced by such writers as Ross Wallace and Albert Pike. In the East, John Neal, William Ware, Lunt, Hillard, Mrs. Child, — and in regions farther south, Conrad, Kennedy, and Simms, — were active at this time. There were others whose claim to attention will be frequent throughout this work. But to enumerate all who, in the second quarter of this century, held themselves of much account is quite beyond my need and intention. Of the New York group, Willis perhaps had the most adroit and graceful talent, but it was not always exercised as by one possessing convictions. His kindness,

Growing literary activity.

Henry Theodore Tuckerman:
1813-71.

Charles Fenno Hoffman:
1806-84.

George Pope Morris: 1802-64.

Thomas Dunn English:
1819-

Park Benjamin:
1809-64.

Ralph Hoyt:
1810-78.

William Wilberforce Lord:
1819-

William Ross Wallace: 1819-81.

Albert Pike:
1809-

John Neal:
1793-1876.

George Lunt:
1803-85.

Robert Taylor Conrad:
1810-58.

*Nathaniel
Parker
Willis :*
1806-67.

"*The Lit-
erati.*"

*Pseudo-
American-
ism.*

tact, and experience of the world made him an arbiter in a provincial time. They also seriously exposed him to the three worldly perils of which, no less than in the days of the Apostle John, the children of the Lord must have a care. A few of his lyrics are charmingly tender and delicate, but he never did himself full justice as a poet, nor realized the purpose of his ambitious boyhood. The bustle of the Literati, as Poe chose to call them, and the concentration of thriving journals and book-houses in Philadelphia and New York, — whither most roads then seemed to lead, — made for a while the scribbling class of this middle region very conspicuous and alert. Their kith and kin, scattered throughout the States, multiplied in numbers. The first green fruit of a school-system, under which boys and girls had models set before them, and were incited to test their own skill in composition, fell in plenty from the tree. Each county had its prodigy contributing to the annuals and magazines. Lowell's "mass-meeting" of poets was in continuous session, — made up of those who wrote verse, read and praised it one to another, and printed it for their countrymen to read and praise. The dull and authoritative felt the responsibilities of the situation. Never was a more united effort made, with malice prepense, to create an indigenous school. It was thought essential that purely American themes and incidents should be utilized. Cockney poets, emulating the method of Cooper, sent fancy ranging through the aboriginal forest, and wreaked their measures upon the supposititious Indian of that day. Powhatan and Tecumseh became the heroes of hot-pressed cantos, now extinct. The Spirit of Wakondah was invoked by one bard, and made to tower above the Rocky Mountains, more awe-inspiring than Camoëns's Spirit

of the Cape. Each poet, moreover, tried his hand at every form of work, and each thought it specially incumbent upon himself to write a drama, — not solely for the stage, but that America might not be deficient in the most complex order of poetical composition. Since the heyday of the Della Crusicans never were so many neophytes and amateurs suffered to bring their work before the public. Women took part in the campaign, and, truth to say, were often more spontaneous and natural than their brother-writers. One of the sex, Mrs. Sigourney, long had been supplying the prose and verse that answered to the simple wants of a primitive constituency. Another, "Maria del Occidente," gained something like fame, and even beyond the seas. She was, in fact, a woman of ardent feeling, instinctive art, and undoubted metrical talent, though scarcely meriting the praise which Lamb and Southey awarded her, or the extravagant eulogium of her modern editor. There was no lack of rivals to her success among the American pupils of Mrs. Hemans and Miss Landon. Such caterers to the literary market were found not only upon this side of the Atlantic. England was slowly escaping from her own sentimentalists; the "Annuals" and "Souvenirs" were still in vogue, and the fashions of the two countries were less divided than now. Poe, with a critical eye made somewhat keen by practice, saw the ludicrous side of all this, and poured out vials of wrath upon his contemporaries, though with no just claim to impartiality. Lowell, from a classical distance, celebrated their follies in the lines beginning,

"But stay, here comes Tityrus Griswold, and leads on
The flocks whom he first plucks alive, and then feeds on!"

But this reminds us that Poe, Lowell, Longfellow,

*Lydia
Howard
Huntley
Sigourney*: 1791-
1865.

*Maria
Gowen
Brooks*:
1795-1845.

The Sentimentalists.

*Curative
applications.*

*Survival
of the fit-
test.*

and Emerson were gaining influence at that very time ; that others since eminent in our literature were gradually distinguished from the multitude ; that, however absurd and depressing the condition just set forth, a superficial literary movement may be better than no movement at all. As the voyage progressed, it really was surprising how soon the dullards and pretenders went below, while the born sailors helped the vessel forward. The fit survivors of a brood of poets and authors soon obtained a grateful hearing, and a few publishers found pleasure and profit in nursing the works of these home-writers. A number of poets — men of individual traits, but allied in sentiment and taste, and belonging to the same generation — seemed to arise at once, and gained the position which they have steadfastly held to the present day.

II.

*Experi-
mental
failures
needful to
ultimate
success.*

ALL this preliminary ferment, then, was in some way needful. The experiments of many who thought themselves called enabled the few who were chosen to find motives and occasions for work of real import. The first year of the new dispensation was worth more in its product than the score of years preceding it. The poets who now came to the front have gained distinction justly, vying with those of other countries in finish and thought, and in that reflection of the life about them which alone could make them the leaders of a national school. At the recent date when the formation of such a school became manifest, these poets spoke truthfully for our people as they were and had been. One who gives their verse the fair consideration which he would extend to that of any foreign land or language is led to this conclusion.

*Genuine
quality
of the more
recent
school.*

The new poetry was not autochthonous in the sense of differing from all previous outgrowth of the universal human heart, and as at variance with forms that have long seemed natural to our mother-tongue, but rather in unaffected presentation of the feeling and ideas of its constituency, and after this wise was as national, fresh, and aspiring as America herself. If this land has not yet grown to full voice, it has not lacked a characteristic expression in the verse of our favorite poets. Their careers, we have seen, began almost simultaneously at the close of the second fifth of this century, and have been prolonged until now, through a period of nearly fifty years. Let me again briefly refer to the elements which our literature hitherto might justly be called upon to idealize, and make some mention of the leading poets whose song has been the response to such a call.

III.

I HAVE said that a fellowship with the spirit of natural Landscape, and the recognition of its beauty and majesty, were the earliest, as they are the most constant, traits of American verse. The contemplation of nature has not often been the first step, or the second, in the progress of ideality. But this remark applies to primitive races. The aborigines of a country are almost a part of its mould, — or, at least, so closely related to its dumb fauna that they reflect but little on the mountains, woods, and waters which appear to surround them as a matter of course. Heroic or savage deeds of prowess are their first incitements to poetic utterance. Even an extended period of culture and growth has not always led them to consider the landscape objectively. Of this the Greeks, with

*Traits of
American
verse.*

1. *Truth-
ful reflec-
tion of Na-
ture.*

*The usual
order re-
versed.*

*Our first
distinctive
group of
painters.*

their curious disregard of natural scenery, are a familiar example. They observed nature only to inform it with their own life, until there was no river or tree without its genius. First, epic action ; next, patriotism and devotion ; afterward, dramatic passion ; last of all, analysis and reflective art. In our own settlements, a race that already had gone through these stages took possession of a new world. A struggle with its conditions involved a century of hardship and distrust. The final triumph, the adjustment of the people to their locality, brought a new understanding, out of which came the first original quality in our poetry and design. Here it is to be remembered that descriptive literature, poetry or prose, though not earlier upon the record of intellectual development, is lower as respects the essential worth of Art than that which is emotional or dramatic. In the full prime of creative work, the one must serve as a background for the other, upon which attention chiefly is concentrated. All in all, it was a foregone conclusion that our first independent artists should betake themselves to the study and utilization of American scenery. In painting, our first distinctive school—for such I do not term the early group of historical and portrait painters, from West to Allston—has been that of the landscapists. Let us own that when either poetry or painting deals with nature in no copyist's fashion, but with a sense of something "deeply interfused," it may reach the higher plane of art-expression. To this end our modern painters, upon the whole, have striven, from the time of Cole. The hands of Durand, Inness, Kensett, the two Giffords, Whittredge, McEntee, Church, Bierstadt, Brown, Martin, Wyant, have given

ing in technique and variety from the experiments of younger men. The literary counterpart of this school began with Bryant, the Druid of our forests, the high-priest of Nature in her elemental types. These he has celebrated with the coolness and breadth that were traits of the earlier painters named, though lacking the freedom and detail of their successors. It is dangerous to measure one art by another, or to confuse their terms; yet we feel that the relationship between the pictures of Durand and Kensett, for example, and the meditative verse of Bryant — from “Thanatopsis” and “A Forest Hymn” to “The Night Journey of a River” — is near and suggestive. Bryant was at the head of our reflective poets, finding his bent at the outset, and holding it to the very close. His work rose to an imaginative height which descriptive poetry of itself rarely attains.

He was followed — at an obvious distance — by Percival, Wilcox, Street, and other mild celebrants of nature, who failed of his breadth and elevation. Their patient measures show how strongly the scenery of America has impressed her people. To the present day, the landscape, however incidental to the poetry of Emerson, Whittier, Thoreau, Lowell, and Taylor, is constantly there, and fresh as a rocky pasture-ground in New England or Pennsylvania compared with a storied park of Warwickshire. In the work of Mrs. Thaxter, Piatt, and other recent idyllists, it is natural, sympathetic, — in short, thoroughly American. And for me the value of the poetry of Whitman and Joaquin Miller does not belong to the method and democratic vistas of the one, and the melodramatic romance of the other; but to Whitman’s fresh, absolute handling of outdoor nature, and to the fine surprises

*Their com-
peers in
Song.*

Bryant.

*Carlos
Wilcox:
1794-1827.*

*Alfred
Billings
Street:
1811-81.*

*Fresh and
original
treatment
of land-
scape.*

2. *Present-
ation of
the nation-
al senti-
ment.*

Our poetry has been equally fortunate as the language of the ideas and human emotions to which, as a people, we most readily incline. Notwithstanding the change and unrest of a new country, the *milieu* which Taine found in England here exists, and with fewer qualifications. Not that America is all middle class, as some have asserted. But her ideal is derived from sentiments which, even more than in Great Britain, preserve a Saxon quality, — those of domesticity, piety, freedom, loyalty to the institutions of the land. If unessential to various dramatic and impassioned art-creations, they have an art and passion of their own, and, in recognizing this, our singers are more national than their English contemporaries. The latter, except through the odes and idyls of Tennyson, have conveyed to us little of the home-sentiment, the English faith and feeling, which brought the motherland to greatness. Doubtless it is because these qualities were so general in the song of their predecessors that the Victorian choir has earnestly concerned itself with mediæval and legendary work, and with those technical diversions which are counted as art for art's sake.

*Our poets
true to
their own
time and
kind.*

Bryant.

Whittier.

*Pro aris et
focis.*

The instinct of our poets has led them first to charge their lyrics with the feeling of their time and people, and in doing this they have, almost without exception, given voice to their own heart. Bryant's verse is an illustration. It everywhere breathes of liberty and patriotism. But as an apostle of all the sentiments just named, — taken singly or in combination, — Whittier, the Quaker bard of Amesbury, whose art is by turns so homely and so refined, certainly is preëminent, and in a sense has made himself that uncrowned laureate, the people's poet. His legend is *pro aris et focis*. He glows with faith, strong by

heredity in New England, and thence outflowing to the West, nor forgets the beauty and duty of temperance, charity, and virtue. Nothing restrains his democratic conception of the freedom of the soil, the nobility of work, the right to labor for one's self. He represents (to borrow Hugo's formula) our conflict with oppression, and was the herald and inspired seer of the enduring fiery conflict that preceded the antislavery war. His earnestness and burning effort contrast with Bryant's stern repose. In various national qualities the more polished work of Longfellow and Lowell has rivaled Whittier's, and sustained it. They, in their ways, and Gallagher, Holland, Trowbridge, and Taylor, each in his own, have paid tribute to the charm of American home-life, and have repeated the ancestral and prevalent feeling of regions which they thoroughly comprehend. In this direction they have been accompanied by many writers in verse or prose, — simple balladists like the Vermonter, Eastman, and tale-writers with the insight and fidelity that belong to Sylvester Judd, Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Rose Terry Cooke. In times of concentrated emotion, our poets of all degrees have broken out in vivid strains. Mrs. Howe's "Battle Hymn" is memorable. There is native fire in the lyrics of McMaster, Melville, O'Hara, Finch, Palmer, Randall, Forcethe Willson, and that brave, free singer, Brownell, to whom Ticknor, sounding the war-cry of the South, bore a half-likeness in manner and spirit. There have been many single voices, heard but for a moment, of this class. Nor should we quite forget the humbler song-makers for the people, such as Foster, the negro melodist, — and Work, to whose stirring music our soldiers marched with a will, and of whose songs two or three at least should preserve the name of their

*Conflict
with op-
pression.*

*William
Davis Gal-
lagher:
1808-*

*Josiah
Gilbert
Holland:
1819-81.*

*John
Townsend
Trow-
bridge:
1827-*

*Charles
Gamage
Eastman:
1816-61.*

*Julia
Ward
Howe:
1819-*

*Herman
Melville:
1817-*

*Byron
Forcethe
Willson:
1837-67.*

*Henry
Howard
Brownell:
1820-72.*

*Francis
Orrery
Ticknor:
1822-74.
(See In-
dex.)*

Religious Verse.

*Arthur
Cleveland
Coxe :
1818-
(See In-
dex.)*

composer. In closing this section I will add a word in regard to a kind of verse which, of all, is the most common and indispensable, — that devoted to reverence and worship. The religious verse of America, whether the work of poets at large, or of those whose range is chiefly confined to it, — Muhlenberg, Coxe, Doane, Peabody, Croswell, Sears, S. Johnson, S. Longfellow, Abraham Coles, Ray Palmer, Harriet Kimball, Hedge, Dr. Frothingham, Randolph, Chadwick, Savage, and many other orthodox or liberal composers, — ranks in quality, if not in quantity, with the hymnology of other lands.

American female poets.

*The early
and later
sisterhoods
of song.
(See In-
dex.)*

No one can enter upon the most cursory review of our literature without being struck by the share which women have had in its production. A sisterhood of song, expressing its own delicate and heroic nature, and many thoughts and affections that are sweet and high and impassioned, has won in America a just and distinctive regard. The female voices early added softness, and at times strength, to the general song. The names of Maria Lowell, Mrs. Osgood, Mrs. Whitman, the Cary sisters, Mrs. Judson, Mrs. Sewall, Elizabeth Lloyd Howell, Mrs. Oakes Smith, Mrs. E. C. Kinney, and Mrs. Botta, some of whom have passed away, are cherished by not a few. They have had successors — of whom are Mrs. Cooke, Mrs. Stoddard, Mrs. Allen, Mrs. Whitney, Mrs. Dorr, Mrs. Greenough, Lucy Larcom, Mrs. Hudson, and others to whom I shall refer in a later chapter — some of whose names are veritably household words throughout the country, and much of whose work, in verse and prose, has taken a subtler range, a better finish, a definite and influential hold upon the public attention.

University group.

American culture, if not so exact and diligent as that of more learned nations, is sympathetic, and ex-

plores all literatures for its delight and betterment. It is most advanced in the sections where it took its start, but there and elsewhere is well represented in our poetry. A university school has sent out rays from Cambridge, the focus being the home of a poet with whose rise the new poetic movement fairly began. He grew to be not the poet of a section, nor even of a people, but one rendered into many languages, and known throughout the world. Longfellow, on the score of his fame, and his almost exclusive devotion to the muse, became the centre of a group distinguished by culture, elegant learning, regard for the manner of saying no less than for what is said. His early legend rightly was *Outre Mer*, for he stimulated our taste by choice presentation of what is rare abroad, until it grew able to perceive what is rare and choice at home. With thoughts of this singer come thoughts of peace, of romance, of the house made beautiful by loving hands. Lowell and Holmes, no less than Longfellow, and wonted to the same atmosphere, represent our conflict with rudeness, ignorance, and asceticism. They laugh the Philistine to scorn, and with their wit and learning advance the movement toward sweetness and light. Near them are others, such as Parsons, Story, Robert Lowell, Mrs. Fields, who may be classed more readily with a composite group of whom I have yet to speak. But first let us observe that an imaginative and unique division of the recent school is that which represents the liberal philosophy of New England and its conflict with ancestral superstition. The mind and soul of Transcendentalism seemed to find their predestined service in the land of the Puritans. The poetry which sprang from it had a more subtle aroma than that whose didacticism infected the English Lake school. The latter made

Longfellow.

"Outre Mer."

Conflict with asceticism.

Robert Traill Spence Lowell 1816-

Transcendental group.

Concord and Grassmere.

*Andrews
Norton :*
1786-1853.

Emerson.

*Amos
Bronson
Alcott :*
1799-

*Henry
David
Thoreau :*
1817-62.

*Sarah
Margaret
Fuller*

Ossoli :
1810-50.

*Jones
Very :*
1813-80.

*Christo-
pher
Pearse
Cranch :*
1813-

*William
Ellery
Channing:*
1818-

*David At-
wood Was-
son :* 1823-

*Thomas
Went-
worth
Higgin-
son :* 1823-

*Franklin
Benjamin
Sanborn :*
1831-

*Erastus
Volcott
Ellsworth:*
1822-

*William
Bull
Wright :*
1838-80.

prosaic the verse of famous poets ; out of the former the quickest inspiration of our down-East thinkers seemed to grow. Their philosophy, beginning with the prose and verse of Andrews Norton, and the exalted spirituality of Dr. Channing, and soon going beyond the early liberties, has attained its riper expression in lyrical work, prophetic, mystical, or quaintly wise. It borrowed, in truth, the wisdom of the Orient and the speculations of Germany, but has not failed to apply the vision that so inspired it to the life and action of the New World. The white light of Emerson, the pure and elevated master of the Concord group, has been a steadfast beacon for his companions. Among these, Alcott, Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Jones Very, Cranch, Ellery Channing, Wasson, Higginson, and Sanborn may be reckoned, with due allowance for the individuality of each. Here and there stray singers, like the shy and philosophic minstrel, Ellsworth, have seemed to belong to this peculiarly American caste. Another such was the lamented Dr. Wright, whose gift was delicately pure and thoughtful. Poe was right in claiming that the speculative tendency of these poets was at odds with the artistic effect of their work, but ought to have seen that a more exquisite feeling and insight, allied with that tendency, often made amends for it.

Meantime, as I was about to point out, we have had a number of poets, including most of those who do not live in New England, who have clung to their art from sheer love of the beautiful, under varying chances of favor and discouragement. They have paid slight regard to their respective localities, writing after their own versatile moods, and looking wherever they pleased for models and themes. Some have followed other than literary pursuits, or, if earning their bread

by the pen, have accepted the vicissitudes of their craft under the conditions heretofore mentioned. Their tastes and habits have made them composite, if not cosmopolitan. Their work is not provincial, though often less original than that of some whom we have named. But in escaping the rigors of a chosen section, they have also foregone its distinctions. The East has loved its poets, and, what is more, has listened to them. The New England spirit has been that of Attica, which state, we are told, "secure in her sterility, boasted that her land had never been inundated by these tides of immigration," and that "she traced the stream of her population in a backward course through many generations." With respect to philosophy and economics, and in fields of taste and literary judgment, the trust of the modern Athens is founded on her own usage and her men of note. It is true that the reverence paid our elder poets is now general throughout the land, and as sincere and beautiful as that which the bards of Germany and Scandinavia always have received at the hands of their countrymen. It even has its jealous side, and renders it hard for new aspirants to gain their share of welcome. But New York has been to her later poets, somewhat as Oxford Street was to De Quincey, a stony-hearted mother. This is partly due to the standards of success established by monetary power and prosperity, and partly to the accident that here, more than in the East, idealists have had to live by all sorts of very practical work. Writers have been tolerated and even welcomed, but not honored and taken as counsellors until they have proved themselves worldly wise, or gained their influence elsewhere. Then New York has been proud of them, in her awkward way, and used them at need, but has assigned to the provinces

An independent class.

Eastern regard for letters and song.

Wordsworth's "Greece," p. 72.

Metropolitan indifference.

the duty of reading their works. Bryant came to be her most honored citizen, and for some years was a kind of literary Doge; his city knew that he was a poet, for the country had told her so. It would be interesting to learn how large a proportion of the wealthy classes among whom he was a peer, and who placed him at the head of feasts and civic gatherings, knew this through an appreciative knowledge of his poetry. Such, however, is apt to be the state of things in a great commercial centre, — so great that it matures slowly, and must long await that splendid prime of which smaller towns earlier furnish types in miniature; and under just such conditions many a poet has struggled, yet gone down to time and fame.

*Poets of
the artistic
and cosmo-
politan
type.
(See Chap.
XII., and
Index.)*

The artistic bent of Parsons and Story, of Poe, Taylor, Stoddard, and Aldrich, in New York; of the Philadelphians, Boker and Read; of the Southerners, Thompson, Timrod, Hayne, Lanier, and Esten Cooke; and of various younger writers who justify future notice, has been plainly seen in the application of each man's gift, whatever its degree. They have cared for poetry alone, and have believed its country to be universal, and that England, whose poets conspicuously avail themselves of the materials and atmosphere of other lands, should be the last to lay down a law of restriction. Herein, nevertheless, they subject their work, upon its general merits, to comparison with models which they scarce could hope to surpass; for only the highest excellence could draw attention to them as poets of America. Some of our verse composed in this wise has been so charming, and withal so original, as to make reputations. Poe's lyrics are an example, and others besides Poe, less conspicuous as victims of unrest and heroes of strange careers,

also have represented the conflict with materialism, and have shown as genuine a gift and a wider range. Dr. Parsons holds a place of his own. He is one of those rare poets whose infrequent work is so beautiful as to make us wish for more. In quality, at least, it is of a kind with Landor's; his touch is sure, and has at command the choicer modes of lyrical art, — those which, although fashion may overslaugh them, return again, and enable a true poet to be quite as original as when hunting devices previously unessayed. His independence, on the other hand, is exhibited in his free renderings of Dante. These, with Eliot Norton's exquisite translation of the "Vita Nuova," and Longfellow's of the entire "Commedia," with Bryant's of the "Iliad" and "Odyssey," Brooks's of various German authors, Taylor's of "Faust," and with the kindred achievements of Munford, Cranch, Leland, Macdonough, Alger, Long, Duffield, Wilstach, Coles, Howland, Miss Preston, Miss Frothingham, and Emma Lazarus (whose poetic version of Heine recently appeared), have made the American school of translation somewhat eminent. Parsons' briefer poems often are models, but occasionally show a trace of that stiffness which too little employment gives even the hand of daintier sense. "Lines on a Bust of Dante," in structure, diction, loftiness of thought, is the peer of any modern lyric in our tongue. Inversion, the vice of stilted poets, becomes with him an excellence, and old forms and accents are rehandled and charged with life anew. It is to be regretted that Dr. Parsons has not used his gift more freely. He has been a poet for poets, rather than for the people; but many types are required to fill out the hemicycle of a nation's literature. Story's various talents and acquirements as a scholar, painter, sculp-

*Thomas
William
Parsons:*
1819-

Translations.

*Charles
Eliot Norton:* 1827-

*Charles
Timothy
Brooks:*
1813-83.

(See Index.)

*Parsons a
master of
lyric verse.*

*William
Westmore
Story:*
1819-

	tor, author, and what not, and his prolonged residence and studies abroad, are mirrored in his verse. This, indeed, is so un-American that I was held to blame by a prominent London journal for not reviewing him as a British-born and Victorian poet. He has extreme refinement, but is a close follower of Browning's lyrico-dramatic method, and more novel in his choice of themes than in their treatment. "Cleopatra" and "Praxiteles and Phryne" are striking pieces, and show him at his best. Among the group
<i>Taylor.</i>	under notice was the ardent and generous Taylor, whose seniority in death has caused my selection of him as one of those who illustrate the rise of the American school, and upon whom alone I venture any extended criticism. Poe, the eldest of the art-group, and the subject of a future chapter, is related to the others as a toiling professional writer, whose ideality maintained itself apart from the atmosphere about him. In many respects he is an exception to the
<i>Conflicts with didacticism and tradition.</i>	rest, but, on the whole, may be counted the first to revolt against didacticism, from the artist's point of view; while Whitman, on the other hand, is hostile to art-tradition and conventionalism, as an apostle of the democracy of the future. Another artist-poet was
<i>Thomas Buchanan Read: 1822-72.</i>	Buchanan Read, whose song was of a more genuine quality than the painting which he made his vocation. His idyllic verse fairly portrayed the rural life of his own State, but his successes were a few rhymed lyrics and idyls that will be preserved. "The Closing Scene" gained a reputation through its descriptive beauty and clever treatment of a standard form of verse. His townsman, Boker, is the eldest of a little
<i>George Henry Boker: 1822-</i>	group to be described in a chapter on Bayard Taylor. A close study of the English poets especially

composition. Although his plays follow old models, and are founded upon the historic themes of foreign lands, they have sterling dramatic and poetic qualities. Thirty-five years ago, in an essay upon the condition and prospect of our literature, Dr. Griswold said that "the success of the plays of Bird and Conrad, and the failure of those of Longfellow and Willis," showed that there was still "patriotism enough among us to prefer works with the American inspiration to those of any degree of artistic merit without it." But it is recorded to the credit of some of Boker's plays, which are of a poetic and literary mould, and bear the test of reading, that, like their humbler prototypes,—the acting plays of Bird, Conrad, Sargent, Mathews, and others,—they were found to have the life and substance that could gain them favor, not only in the closet, but on the stage. Some of them are antecedent to the realistic manner of our own time; others have won renewed success in the present day, and proved themselves to be of a type superior to the chance and change of fashion. They show, one and all, a manly hand, and the healthy imagination of the poet, their author. His minor pieces are of uneven quality, some of them thoroughly national and spirited. Such lyrics as "On Board the Cumberland," "A Ballad of Sir John Franklin," and the "Dirge for a Soldier," often continue a poet's name more surely than the efforts which in truth are his masterpieces.

Stoddard, the life-long friend and brother in song of Taylor and Boker, is still in full voice. A New Englander born, the honors of his life and service belong to New York. The whole range of his poetry has the unrestricted or cosmopolitan tendency of which I speak. He had poor advantages in youth, but an

Introduction to "The Prose Writers of America."
By R. W. Griswold.
1847.

Epos Sargent:
1813-80.
Cornelius Mathews:
1817-

Boker's lyrics.

Richard Henry Stoddard:
1825-

An imaginative poet.

His blank-verse, lyrics, etc.

absolute bent for letters, and a passion for the beautiful resembling that of Poe. His knowledge of English literature, old and new, early became so valuable that his younger associates, drawn to him by admiration of his poetry, never failed to profit by his learning and suggestions. His life has been peculiarly that of a writer, with its changes and pleasurable pains, and is marked by independence, sensitiveness, devotion to his calling, and pride in the city with whose literary growth and labor he is identified. The characteristics of Stoddard's verse are affluence, sincere feeling, strength, a manner unmistakably his own, very delicate fancy, and, above all, an imagination at times exceeded by that of no other American poet. This last quality pervades his ambitious pieces, and at times breaks out suddenly in the minor verse through which he is best known. The exigencies of his profession have too constantly drawn upon his resources; the bulk of his miscellaneous verse is large, and to this is somewhat due its unevenness. No poet is more unequal; few have more plainly failed now and then. On the other hand, few have reached a higher tone, and a selection could be made from his poems upon which to base a lasting reputation. "The Fisher and Charon," "The Dead Master," and the "Hymn to the Sea," are noble pieces of English blank verse, the secret of whose measure is given only to the elect; one is impressed by the art, the thought, the imagination, which sustain these poems, and the Shakespeare and Lincoln odes. Stoddard's abundant songs and lyrics are always on the wing and known at first sight,—a skylark brood whose notes are rich with feeling. The sweet and direct

equal to him in years, he is, perhaps, the foremost of the artistic or cosmopolitan group.

If I cared to give, in detail, various by-road illustrations of the American spirit, I could cite many instances where the brooding humor, the quaintness and frankness, the pluck and fun and carelessness, of our new people long since cropped out in rhyme. These characteristics give life to the wise and witty purpose of Holmes's and Lowell's satires, and to the verses of Saxe, Leland, Fields, and Butler. We have their continuance and diversity in the clever, off-hand fantasies of younger men. There is no lack of dialect, bric-à-brac, and society verse. Some of our young Bohemians all at play, twenty years ago, — of whom George Arnold was American by birth, as were Halpine and O'Brien by adoption, — while not without their earnest moods, did rollicking work of this kind, and in Arnold's case it seemed to his friends but an offshoot of the better work he had it in him to do. The Dean among our writers of poems for occasions is unquestionably Dr. Holmes, by virtue of his apt response to the instant call, and of the wit, wisdom, conviction, and the scholarly polish that relegate his lightest productions to the select domain of art.

To Whitman a chapter will be given, and is needed for the fair consideration of his traits and attitude. He represents, first of all, his own personality; secondly, the conflict with aristocracy and formalism. Against the latter he early took the position of an iconoclast, avowing that the time had come in which to create an American art by rejection of all forms, irrespective of their natural basis, which had come to us from the past. In their stead he proffered a form of his own. If I rightly understand the meaning of

American satire and Jeux-d'Esprit.

John Godfrey Saxe:
1816-

Charles Godfrey Leland:
1824-

James Thomas Fields:
1816-81.

William Allen Butler:
1825-

(See Chap. XII.)

Holmes.

Whitman.

treme views, in deprecation of what is and anticipation of what is to be, are now somewhat tempered by years and experience. He is a man of striking physical and mental qualities, and excels most writers in personal influence, tact, and adroitness as a man of the world. He is an avowed champion of democracy, and accepted as such by the refined classes at home and abroad. I shall refer to his minute knowledge and healthy treatment of the American landscape, of the phases and products of outdoor Nature, for in this respect his most fragmentary pieces show the handicraft of an artist and poet.

A genuine home-school, thus having existed, should be valued at its worth.

See "No. Am. Review": Jan. 1881.

The first course ended.

We need not continue farther the analysis suggested in the previous chapter. I have not tried to make a rigid classification of all who have borne a part in the rise of a home-school, but to observe the general groups of which some of our elder poets may be called the leaders, and the condition and sentiment by which their work has been affected. Enough has been said, I think, to justify the assertion that such a school already has had a career which Americans should be swift to recognize and slow to undervalue. One "of your own poets" has taken a different view, declaring that a barren void exists,—that our poetry has been marked by an absence of patriotism, and that it has shown brain and no soul. A more incorrect or wilfully pessimistic statement never was made. In every department of art, times of energy are divided by times of calm. The first course is run, and there is a temporary halt, so far as poetry is concerned. The imaginative element in our literature is active as ever, but in other directions. Meantime, we have singers in their prime, resting their voices for the moment, and others whose fresh notes will soon be more definitely heard. Both these classes

will come within our review. The younger poets, upon whom the future depends, must prove themselves well endowed, if they are to succeed to the laurels of those who, blessed with years and honors, have held the affection of life-long readers scattered far and wide. It is of those elders only, the representative founders of our school, that I have undertaken to write at any length. To pass critical judgments upon those of my own, or a younger, generation is beyond my province. The time will come when some of them will in turn occupy the high places, and furnish typical illustrations of poetry and the poetic life. In that near future there will not be wanting critics to measure their works, nor hands to award the recompense that is due to them who add to the sum of human pleasure by their ministry of song.

(See Chapter XII.)

CHAPTER III.

WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT.

I.

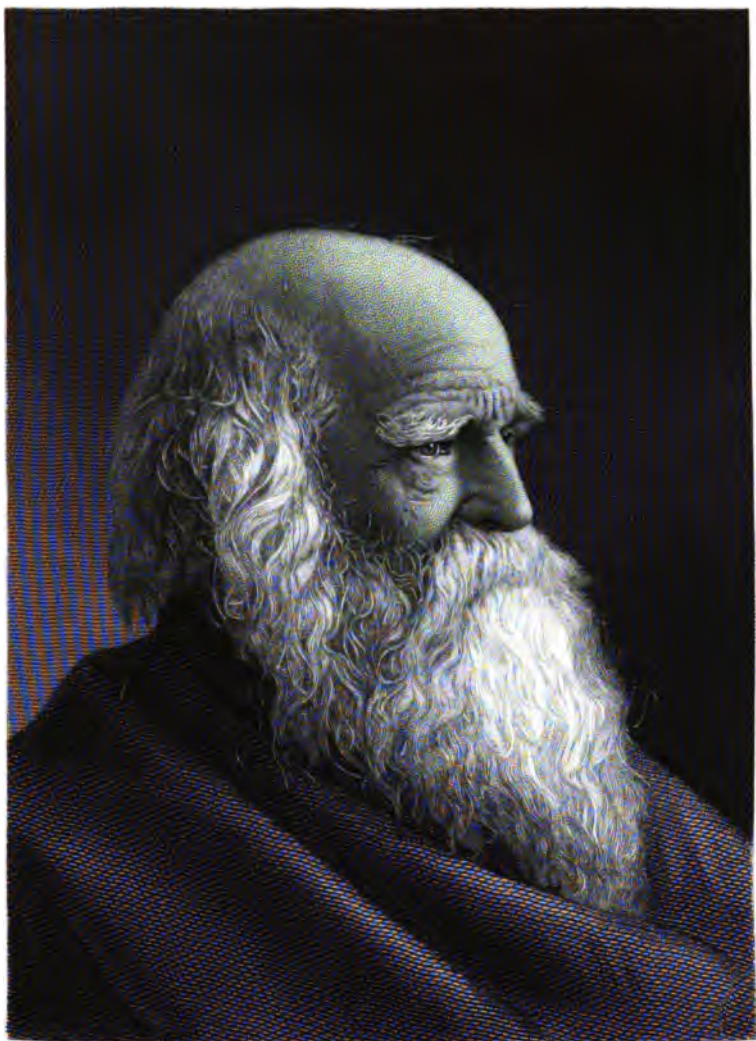
*Impressive
feeling
excited by
the poet's
death.*

WHEN Bryant died, in the flowery season that had inspired his sweetest lyric, the general pause and hush were singularly impressive. To the death of no other American, for a long time before and after, could be applied so aptly that Indian metaphor of the sound of the fall of a great oak in the forest. The feeling was not one of unexpectedness, although his old age was free from decrepitude, — as if some deity kinder than Aurora had given him immortality without decay; not one of sorrow, for he lived beyond the usual limit of life; not that which we have when some man of office, rank, entanglement in great affairs, suddenly passes away. Yet the station of “the father of American song” was unique, and his loss was something strange and positive. He stood alone, — in certain respects, an incomparable figure. He had become not only a representative citizen, journalist, poet, but the serene, transfigured ideal of a good and venerable man.

*Born in
Cummington,
Mass.,
Nov. 3,
1794.*

As a writer he had been before the public from a date near the beginning of the century, and so changeless through all its changes that his critics, in estimating the poet just dead, really were judging the





Engraved by S. Hollyer. Gutenberg, N. J.

A typical republican.

Mental and moral traits.

His position strengthened by worldly success.

of his genius, he must be considered not only as an American poet who represented his country at a certain time, but as a man speaking for himself. And in this wise, first seeking a key to his literary value, we see that he had become a most satisfying type of the republican, joining the traditional gravity, purity, and patriotic wisdom of the forefathers with the modernness and freshness of our own day. His life, public and private, was in keeping with his speech and writings. We often say of a poet or artist that he should not be judged like other men by his outward irrelevant mark or habit; that to see his best, his truest self you must read his poems or study his paintings. In reading Bryant's prose and verse, and in observing the poet himself, our judgments were the same. He always held in view liberty, law, wisdom, piety, faith; his sentiment was unsentimental; he never whined nor found fault with condition or nature; he was robust, but not tyrannical; frugal, but not too severe; grave, yet full of shrewd and kindly humor. Absolute simplicity characterized him. Ethics were always in sight. He was, indeed, an "old man for counsel"; what he learned in youth from the lives and precepts of Washington, Hamilton, and their compeers, that he taught and practised to the last. His intellectual faculties, like his physical, were balanced to the discreetest level, and this without abasing his poetic fire. His genius was not shown by the advance of one faculty and the impediment of others; it was the spirit of an even combination, and a fine one.

It is true that his practical success — the worldly substance he had gained by the thrift and prudence that "poor Richard's" maxims inculcate — gave him a prestige in the wealth-respecting metropolis which as a poet alone he could not, in his generation, have

secured. It brought him near, as Mr. Hazeltine has pointed out, to the hosts of the Philistines, but it also impressed them with a conviction that there must be something in poetry after all. They saw him visibly haloed with a distinction beyond that which wealth and civic influence could bestow. Besides, even Philistia has its æsthetic rituals and pageantry, and it was with a gracious and picturesque sense of the fitness of things that he bore his stately part in our festivals and processions. To this extent he was conventional, but he made conventionalism suggestive and often the promoter of thought and art.

Philistia.

II.

HERE, then, was a minstrel who, in appearance, more than others of a readier lyrical genius, seemed not unlike the legendary bard of Gray:—

"The Bard."

"The poet stood,
(Loose his beard and hoary hair
Streamed, like a meteor, to the troubled air),
And with a master's hand, and prophet's fire,
Struck the deep sorrows of his lyre."

Look at the extent of the period through which he flourished. He began in the early springtime of Wordsworth, and long outlived new men like Baude-
laire and Poe. The various epochs of his career scarcely bear upon our consideration of its product, which, after his escape from the manner of Pope, was of an even quality during seventy years. In this he was fortunate and unfortunate. The former, because his early pieces were so noteworthy that, in the dearth of American poetry, they at once became home classics for a homely people, and one generation after another learned them admiringly by heart. At this

*A pro-
longed and
equable ca-
reer.*

time, even though composed in the latest fashion and of greater merit than Bryant's, an author's pieces could not obtain for him such recognition and fame. But, owing to this otherwise good fortune, he worked under restrictions from which he never was even measurably freed. Before observing these, it again may be noted that his poetic career had neither rise, height, nor decline. He formed certain methods wholly natural to him in early youth, and was at once as admirable a poet as he ever afterward became. Throughout his prolonged term of life he sang without haste or effort, and always expressed himself rather than the varying methods of the time.

*His feeling
American.*

From the first he was in sympathy with the aspect, atmosphere, feeling, of his own country. His tendency and manner were determined during the idyllic period of this republic, when nature and the thoughts which it suggested were themes for poets, rather than the dramatic relations of man with man. His sentiment was affected by the meditative verse of Cowper and Wordsworth, who rose above didacticism, or made it imaginative by poetic insight. Emerson said of Bryant: "This native, original, patriotic poet. I say original: I have heard him charged with being of a certain school. I heard it with surprise, and asked, What school? For he never reminded me of Goldsmith, or Wordsworth, or Byron, or Moore. I found him always original,—a true painter of the face of this country, and of the sentiment of his own people." This is, in a sense, true; yet there can be little doubt that, in most respects, Wordsworth was the master of his youth. All pupils must acknowledge masters at the beginning, but Murillo was Murillo none the less, although he ground colors for Castillo and studied with Velasquez. Bryant ground his colors

*Emerson,
at the Cen-
tury Club,
on Bry-
ant's 70th
birthday.*

in the open air. His originality consisted in deriving from his studies a method natural to his own gift and condition. The elder Dana puts him on record as saying that "upon opening Wordsworth a thousand springs seemed to gush up at once in his heart, and the face of nature of a sudden to change into a strange freshness and life." Certainly he was not cradled into poetry by wrong, nor perturbed by the wild and morbid passions of a wayward youth. We can imagine him a serious and meditative lad, directed by the guidance of a scholarly father, well versed in the favorite poets of that day, — Pope, Thomson, Aken-side, Cowper, — and at first accepting them as models ; finally, obtaining for himself the clues to a true perception of Nature, and with his soul suddenly exalted by a sense of her

*Words-
worth's
pupil.*

*Our medi-
tative poet
of nature.* 7

"Authentic tidings of invisible things ;
Of ebb and flow, and ever-during power ;
And central peace, subsisting at the heart
Of endless agitation."

This sense was fostered, throughout the changing year, by the landscape of the pastoral region of Massachusetts in which he had his growth. I have referred in a previous chapter to Hugo's works illustrating the conflicts by which man progresses to his enfranchisement, the conflicts with Nature, Superstition, Tyranny, and Society. From the third of these opponents our fathers fled to a new continent, choosing to found a nationality, and entering upon that primeval conflict with nature which to an already civilized people is not without compensations. It results, like a quarrel between generous lovers, in a betrothal of the one to the other, and of such an alliance Bryant was our celebrant. The delights of nature, and meditations upon the universality of life and death, withdrew

him from the study of the individual world. Thus he became a philosophic minstrel of the woods and waters, the foremost of American landscape-poets. In the contest with primeval Nature, man signalizes his victories by educating and rendering more beautiful his captive ; she, in turn, gains a potent influence over him, for a long while driving her rivals from his heart, and compels him in his art and song to express her features and her inspiration.

*Allied to
our early
landscape-
painters.
See p. 47.*

The first enduring American school of painting was a landscape-school. We have observed the analogy between Bryant's poetry and the broad, cool canvas of the founders of that school, — the works of Durand, Cole, Kensett, Inness, various as they may be in depth, tranquillity, or power. Such a harmony exists between the soil, the climate, the fauna, and the flora of an isothermal zone. Bryant, who at once became eminent in his special walk, therein excelled and has outlasted all his compeers and followers. It is not unlikely that he will outlast many of his latest successors, notwithstanding his inferiority when persistence and minuteness of observation are taken into account. Others group together details, compose with enthusiasm, but are deficient in tone, sentiment, imaginative receptivity. Tone is the one thing needful to a true interpretation of nature. Thoreau felt this when he wrote in his diary, "I have just heard the flicker among the oaks on the hillside ushering in a new dynasty. . . . Eternity could not begin with more security and momentousness than the Spring. The Summer's eternity is reëstablished by this note. All sights and sounds are seen and heard both in time and eternity ; and when the eternity of any sight or sound strikes the eye or ear, they are intoxicated with delight. . . . *It is not important that the poet should*

*Tone, and
breadth of
treatment.*

say some particular thing, but that he should speak in harmony with nature. The tone and pitch of his voice is the main thing." Bryant is, in one respect, peculiarly unmodern. Thoreau, despite his own language, caught and observed every detail. Our poet's learning was not scientific; he lacked the minor vision which, an added gift, enables Tennyson and others to give such charm and variety to their work. The ancients may have recognized all shades and colors, but they specified fewer than we specify. Byron, among moderns, painted Nature in her simple, broad manifestations, — the sea, the mountains, the sky, — subordinating her spirit to his own passion, as Bryant allies it with his own tenderness and wisdom, but even he was not her poet in the delicate, microcosmic, recent sense. Both certainly lacked the cleverness and infinite precision of the new school. Bryant regarded nature in its phenomenal aspect, careless of scientific realities. What he gained in this wise was the absence of disillusionizing fact, and a fuller understanding of the language of nature's "visible forms"; what he lost was the wide and various range opened by the endless avenues of new-found truth.

Unscientific
vision †

III.

RIGHT here it is well for us to observe his limitations as a poet, — limitations so undeniable as to be a stumbling-block in the way of those who lightly consider his genius, and sometimes to throw him out of the sympathetic range of elegant and impartial minds. His longevity was not allied with intellectual quickness and fertility, but seemed almost the biologic result of inborn slowness and deliberation. He was not flexible, not facile of ear and voice. He con-

Bryant's
limitations.

Stiffness.

Infertility.

*Deficient
in passion,
humor,
and indi-
viduality.*

sorted with nature in its still or majestic moods, and derived wisdom and refreshment from its tenderness and calm. His gift, as expressed by its product, was not affluent, and scarcely availed itself of his length of years. His reticence in verse was habitual. In old age, poets are apt to write the most, and often to the least advantage, but his pen through much of this period was chiefly devoted to translation. How little of his own poetry he produced in seventy years, — a few scant volumes! Think of Milton, Landor, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Hugo, Longfellow; of the impetuous work of Scott and Byron; of what Shelley, who gave himself to song, accomplished before he died, at twenty-nine. Bryant was thought to be cold, if not severe, of temperament. The most fervent social passions of his song are those of friendship, of filial and fraternal love; his intellectual passion is always under restraint, even when moved by patriotism, liberty, religious faith. There is still less of action and dramatic quality in his verse. Humor, the overflow of strength, is almost absent from it, — when present, sufficiently awkward; yet it should be noted that in conversation, or in the after-dinner talks and speeches so frequent in his later years, his humor was continuous and charming, full of kindly gossip, wisdom, and mirth. He made, as we have seen, little advance upon the early standard of his work. It would seem as if, under the lessons of a father, "who taught him the value of correctness and compression, and enabled him to distinguish between poetic enthusiasm and fustian," he there and then matured, reached a certain point, and became set and stationary. There are few notable expressions and separable

can be said to have a style of his own. Stanzas might be quoted from Collins, Goldsmith, Cowper, even Watts, any one of which would pass for Bryant's. A painter said to me, when I referred to the mannerism of a "characteristic" picture by a certain artist, "Yes, but it is well that it should not look like anybody else's; it is well to be known by one's manner, and to have one's manner known." Where Bryant was most impressive—that is to say, in his blank-verse poems—he had a positive and unmistakable style, quite distinct even from that of his master, Wordsworth. Finally, his diction, when not confined to that Saxon English at every man's use, is bald and didactic,—always sententious, but less frequently rich and full. He had a limited vocabulary at command; I should think that no modern poet, approaching him in fame, has made use of fewer words. His range is like that of Goldsmith, restricted to the simpler phrases of our tongue. Other poets, of an equally pure diction, show here and there, by rare and fine words, the extent of their unused resources, and that they voluntarily confine themselves to "the strength of the positive degree."

In the face of all this, Bryant's poetry has had, and will continue to have, a lasting charm for many of the noblest minds. Since this is not due to his length of years,—for he was not alone in that possession,—nor to richness of detail and imagery, nor to his having adapted himself, like Whittier, to successive changes of thought and diction, how is it that his genius triumphed over its confessed limitations? To understand this, his poetry must be judged as a whole, and not by its affluence or flexibility; and it also must be studied in connection with its author's surroundings and career.

A scant vocabulary.

IV.

*A child of
the far
past.*

*"The Em-
bargo,"
1808.*

"Thanatopsis."

*Its influ-
ence on our
poets.*

THE fact must be kept in sight that he was the creature of our early period. Owing to an extreme precocity, his literary career began at a date prior even to that which the record of his age would suggest; he was writing and printing verse in a time when the eighteenth-century notabilities on his father's shelves were still the approved models of style. We find him in his fourteenth year publishing *The Embargo*, a political satire, of course in rhymed pentameters, and it reached a second edition. With the anticipatory instinct of youth, he shortly passed from the influence of Pope to that of Wordsworth, and quite before the founder of a natural school brought the writers of England into a saving consciousness of his worth. So that Bryant's quick allegiance, fostered by companionship with nature in his own region, really placed him then as far ahead of his time as he seemed, half a century afterward, to be behindhand. "Thanatopsis" was not printed in the "North American Review" until his twenty-first year, but some of it probably was composed when he was sixteen, and it certainly was completed two years before its appearance. Other youths have written good verse as precociously, but no one else of like years ever composed a single poem that had so continuous and elevating an effect upon the literature of a country. Its natural tone, its solemn and majestic cadences, deeply impressed writers other than himself, so that "Thanatopsis," and the lyric, "To a Waterfowl," and various pieces which followed it, became the suggestive models of American poets until the rise of Longfellow. The latter's early verse, and more than one poem in the "Voices of the Night," show very plainly the influence of Bryant, — that Long-

fellow was Bryant's pupil until he formed his own peculiar style, and, in fact, we have his word for it.

The "Inscription for the Entrance to a Wood," given to the "Review" at the same time with "Thanatopsis," is of interest as the earliest specimen in blank-verse of Bryant's nature-painting. His grave, didactic poem, in Spenserian stanzas, *The Ages*, which was delivered before the Harvard alumni, would make little impression in these days, but nothing so good of its kind then had been written in America, and it is marked by occasional fervor and touches of imagination. The author's specific dignity of handling is everywhere maintained. "The Ages" was printed at Cambridge, together with his other poems then written, in a little book of forty-four pages, now excessively rare. The product of his muse grew very slowly; he was nearing middle age before there was enough of it to make a collective edition. The London counterpart of this was edited, with a laudatory preface, by Washington Irving, and gave the poet a foreign reputation. His verse was received as the metrical supplement of Cooper's prose, and as confirming Irving's praise of its imaginative and thoroughly national delineation of American landscape "in its wild, solitary, and magnificent forms." Small volumes of new poems appeared in 1840 and 1844, and illustrated editions of Bryant's poetical works, which foreign and native artists made attractive, were brought out in Philadelphia and New York respectively. When he reached the age of threescore years and ten a collection was made of his later poems. This embraced not a few as sonorous and imaginative as "Thanatopsis" and "A Forest Hymn," and lyrics in every way equal to those of his youthful prime; yet, if I remember rightly, there was little sale for it, and the chief profit which the poet and

"*The Ages*":
read before
the F. B. K.
of Har-
vard, Aug.
30, 1821.

"*Poems*,"
1821.

"*Poems*,"
1832.

"*The Fountain,
and Other
Poems*,"
1842.

"*The White-
footed
Deer*," etc.,
1844.

*Illustrated
Editions*,
1847, 1858.

"*Thirty
Poems*,"
1864.

*No change
in style.*

his publishers received from his metrical works came through new editions, some of which were elaborately illustrated, that were issued when his conspicuousness as a personage, as a striking figure at all civic and literary gatherings of note, increased with his increasing years. The *Thirty Poems*, in fact, displayed the same inflexible restriction to an early key, now quite out of popular accord ; not a particle of concession, — scarcely any consciousness of the radical changes, the advance in diction, imagery, variety of motive, and rhythm, effected by successive generations.

*The poet's
life and oc-
cupations.*

All this indicated a rigid and self-contained nature, but his long absorption in the practical affairs of life must be taken into account. As a youth, with slender means, he started out to make a living ; first, as a lawyer in Berkshire County. After nine years at the bar, he threw up his profession, in view of chances offered by a growing literary reputation, and somewhat out of temper with the chicanery which even then seemed inseparable from the practice of the law, and which in any form was repugnant to his life-long and Roman sense of justice. Yet in the very traits we are observing — in diffident reserve, apparent coldness, real warmth of feeling and personal tenderness vouched for by those who knew him best, respect for abstract truth and right, wrath vehemently aroused by public and private wrongs — he was not unlike the great advocate, Charles O'Connor, who nevertheless devoted his life to enforcing the law's original claim to the perfection of reason and the majesty of power without taint.

*Distaste
for the
law.*

*Journal-
ism.*

Bryant came to New York and entered upon journalism as the editor of a literary magazine, but soon found himself connected with the daily newspaper of which he ultimately became the chief proprietor and editor, and so remained until his dying day. During the

early portion of this town-life he took an active part, that of a leader, in what there was of literary effort and production, — associated with Dana, Halleck, Drake, Verplanck, Sands, young Willis, and other poets and wits of the time. But he became more engrossed in political and economic journalism, seldom yielding to the lyrical impulse, and when in age he again found leisure and desire for song, his voice had grown somewhat alien to modern ears, although there is no sign that he himself perceived it. I am speaking of his poetry: at intervals he wrote books of travels, made up chiefly of letters to the "Evening Post," besides many essays, addresses, orations, which were always clear and adequate, but rarely displaying anything like genius, or striking in their effect.

It is quite plain that he did not give himself to poetry, but added poetry to his ordinary life and occupation. The reverse of this, only, can make the greatest poet. His lack of devotion to a jealous mistress was the fault of his time, and of circumstances which decided his course in life. To him the parting of the ways came early; and what was there in our literary atmosphere and opportunities, sixty years ago, to make poetry the vocation of any thorough-trained, aspiring, and resolute man? The nation called for workers, journalists, practical teachers. If, after accomplishing their daily tasks, they found time to sing a song, it thanked them, and did little more. Poetry was the surplusage of Bryant's labors, or, more likely, their restoring complement. In all likelihood his meditations would not have been expressed in song but for the influence of those early readings, under a discerning father's care. Otherwise, though he could not have failed to become a writer, as a poet he might have been one of the mute oracles whose lot is mourned by Wordsworth: —

Absorption in this profession.

"*Letters of a Traveller,*" and similar prose works, 1850-60.

"*Orations and Addresses,*" 1873; and see his "*Life and Works,*" by Godwin, 1883.

Poetry little more than his avocation.

Cp. "*Victorian Poets*": pp. 81, 82.

— “men endowed with highest gifts,
The vision and the faculty divine;
Yet wanting the accomplishment of verse,
Which, in the docile season of their youth,
It was denied them to acquire.”

But read “The Evening Wind,” see him in his most spontaneous mood, and you feel that, once having learned the art of verse, the poet within him thereafter must break out from time to time. He did not hoard his reputation. But his passion and tenderness did not so readily force him to metrical expression as a feebler amount of either has forced many a weak but more facile singer trained in a less rude and inartistic age.

*Absolute
sincerity.*

On the other hand, he never, by any chance, affected passion or set himself to artificial song. He had the triple gift of Athene, “self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control.” He was incapable of pretending to rapture that he did not feel, and this places him far above a host of those who, without knowing it, hunt for emotions and make poetry little better than a trade. As for his diction, he began when there was no Feast of Pentecost with its gift of tongues. I think that the available portion of a poet’s vocabulary is that which he acquires in youth, during his formative period. It is easier for an adult to learn a foreign language than to enlarge greatly his native range of words, and have them at every-day command. Bryant’s early reading was before the great revival which brought into use the romance-words of Chaucer, Spenser, and the Elizabethan age. It was derived from the poorest, if the smoothest, English period — that which began with Pope and ended with Cowper. The rich advantage of a modern equipment is visible in Tennyson, who had Keats and Shelley for his predecessors; not to

*Effect of
early studies
on literary
diction.*

consider Swinburne, who, above his supernatural gifts of rhythm and language, owes much to youthful explorations in classic and Continental tongues. No doubt Bryant's models confirmed his natural restrictions of speech. But even this narrow verbal range has made his poetry strong and pure ; and now, when expression has been carried to its extreme, it is an occasional relief to recur to the clearness, to the exact appreciation of words, discoverable in every portion of his verse and prose. It is like a return from a florid renaissance to the antique ; and indeed there was something Doric in Bryant's nature. His diction, like his thought, often refreshes us as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land. He refused to depart from what seemed to him the natural order of English verse, — that order which comes to the lips of childhood, and is not foreign to any life or age. The thought was like the measure, that which was old with the fathers and is young in our own time, the pure philosophy of nature's lessons. Give his poems a study, and their simplicity is their charm. How easy it seems to write those natural lines ! Yet it is harder than to catch a hundred fantastic touches of word-painting and dexterous sound. He never was obscure, because he dared not and would not go beyond his proper sight and knowledge, and this was the safeguard of his poetry, his prose, and his almost blameless life.

Verse, to Bryant, was the outflow of his deepest emotions ; a severe taste and discreet temperament made him avoid the study of decoration. Thus he was always direct and intelligible, and appealed to the common people as strongly as to the select few. I have compared him to our stately men of an older time. Among others Daniel Webster might be mentioned as one whose mood and rhetoric are in keeping with the

*A pure
and simple
style.*

*Webster
and Bry-
ant.*

poetry of Bryant. Like Webster, our poet always selected the leading, impressive thought, and brushed the rest aside. This he put in with a firm and glowing touch. Many have thought the works of both the statesman and the poet conventional, but the adjective might be brought to apply to all simple and essential truth and diction. Adopting Arnold's distinction, we see that Bryant's simplicity was not *simplesse*, but *simplicité*. Everett made a good presentation of its strongest claim when he said that poetry, at its best, is "easily intelligible, touching the finest chords of taste and feeling, but never striving at effect. This is the highest merit in every department of literature, and in poetry it is well called inspiration. Surprise, conceit, strange combinations of imagery and expression, may be successfully managed, but it is merit of an inferior kind. The beautiful, pathetic, and sublime are always simple and natural, and marked by a certain serene unconsciousness of effort." "This," he added, "is the character of Mr. Bryant's poetry."

V.

*Bryant's
favorite
measures.*

LET us again, then, observe its forms and themes, and discover clues to the quality of the genius which idealized them. Bryant's chosen measures were few and simple. Two were special favorites, most frequently used for his pictures of nature and his meditations on the soul of things, and in their use he was a master.

*The iambic
quatrain.*

One was the iambic quatrain, in octosyllabic verse, of which the familiar stanza, "Truth crushed to earth will rise again," may be recalled as a specimen. Many of his best modern pieces are composed in this measure, so evenly and firmly that the slightest change

would mar their sound and flow. "A Day Dream," written in the poet's old age, is perfect of its kind, and may rank almost with Collins's nonpareil, "To fair Fidele's Grassy Tomb." Witness such stanzas as these : —

I sat and watched the eternal flow
Of those smooth billows toward the shore,
While quivering lines of light below
Ran with them on the ocean floor."

"Then moved their coral lips; a strain
Low, sweet and sorrowful, I heard,
As if the murmurs of the main
Were shaped to syllable and word."

His variations upon the iambic quatrain, as in the celebrated poems, "To a Waterfowl" and "The Past," are equally successful. The second of the forms referred to is that blank-verse in which his supremacy always was recognized. Among the distinct phases of our grandest English measure that have been observed in literature, Bryant's may be classed with the Reflective, of which Wordsworth, succeeding the didacticians, held unquestioned control, but from the outset it was marked by a quality plainly his own. The essence of its cadence, pauses, rhythm, should be termed American, and it is the best ever written in the New World. Blank-verse is the easiest and the most difficult of all measures; the poorest in poor hands; the finest when written by a true poet. Whoever essays it is a poet disrobed; he must rely upon his natural gifts; his defects cannot be hidden. In this measure Bryant was at his height, and he owes to it the most enduring portion of his fame. However narrow his range, we must own that he was first in the first. He reached the upper air at once in "Thanatopsis," and again and again, though none too frequently, he

His blank-verse.

A panoramic series.

renewed his flights, and, like his own waterfowl, pursued his "solitary way."

The finest and most sustained of his poems of nature are those written in blank-verse. At intervals so rare throughout his life as to resemble the seven-year harvests, or the occasional wave that overtops the rest, he composed a series of those pieces which now form a unique panorama of nature's aspects, moving to the music of lofty thoughts and melodious words. Such are "A Winter Piece," the "Inscription for the Entrance to a Wood," "A Forest Hymn," "Summer Wind," "The Prairies," "The Fountain," "A Hymn of the Sea," "A Rain-Dream"; also a few written late in life, showing that the eye of the author of "Thanatopsis" had not been dimmed, nor was his natural force abated: these are "The Constellations," "The River, by Night," and "Among the Trees." In all the treatment is large and ennobling, and distinctly marks each as Bryant's. The method, that of invocation, somewhat resembles the manner of Coleridge's Hymn in the Vale of Chamouni. When in a less enraptured strain, they exhibit repose, feeling, wise and reverent thought.

Lofty contemplative poems.

In the same eloquent verse, and with like cæsural pauses and inflections, we find his more purely meditative poems, upon an equal or still higher plane of feeling, — "Thanatopsis," the "Hymn to Death," "Earth," "An Evening Revery," "The Antiquity of Freedom," and one of his latest and longest, "The Flood of Years." Yet, in both his reflective verse and that devoted to nature, he often employed lyrical measures with equal excellence; as in the breezy, exquisite poem on "Life," "The Battle Field," "The Future Life," and "The Conqueror's Grave," — the

in his lyrics he seemed like a wind-harp yielding tender music in response to every suggestion of the great Mother whom he loved. Such poems as "June," "The Death of the Flowers," and "The Evening Wind" show this, and also indicate the limits within which his song was spontaneous. Each is the genuine expression of a personal mood, and has by this merit taken its place in metrical literature.

At last, then, we are brought to a recognition of the power in Bryant's verse which has given him a station above that which he could hope to win by its amount or range. It is the *elemental quality* of his song. Like the bards of old, his spirit delights in fire, air, earth, and water,—the apparent structures of the starry heavens, the mountain recesses, and the vasty deep. These he apostrophizes, but over them and within them he discerns and bows the knee to the omniscience of a protecting Father, a creative God. Poets, eminent in this wise, have been gifted always with *imagination*. The verse of Bryant often is full of high imaginings. Select any portion of "Thanatopsis":—

"Pierce the Barcan wilderness,
Or lose thyself in the continuous woods
Where rolls the Oregon, and hears no sound
Save his own dashings—yet the dead are there!"

or this, from "The Prairies":—

"The bee
Fills the savannas with his murmurings,
And hides his sweets, as in the golden age,
Within the hollow oak. I listen long
To his domestic hum, and think I hear
The sound of that advancing multitude
Which soon shall fill these deserts. From the ground
Comes up the laugh of children, the soft voice
Of maidens, and the sweet and solemn hymn

A bard of
the ele-
ments.

+

Imagina-
tion.

*His
"hand on
Nature's
keys."*

Of Sabbath worshippers. The low of herds
Blends with the rustling of the heavy grain
Over the dark-brown furrows. All at once
A fresher wind sweeps by and breaks my dream,
And I am in the wilderness alone."

Read the entire poem of "Earth." Take such stanzas as this, from "The Past":—

"Far in thy realm withdrawn
Old empires sit in sullenness and gloom,
And glorious ages gone
Lie deep within the shadow of thy womb";

such phrases as,

"Old Ocean's gray and melancholy waste";

or, from "A Rain-Dream," an impersonation of

"the Wind of night,
A lonely wanderer between earth and cloud,
In the black shadow and the chilly mist,
Along the streaming mountain-side, and through
The dripping woods, and o'er the plashy fields,
Roaming and sorrowing still, like one who makes
The journey of life alone, and nowhere meets
A welcome or a friend, and still goes on
In darkness."

Take passages like these,— and they are not infrequent in Bryant's poetry,— make allowance for the law by which any real poet's work is sure to grow upon us in close examination, and we still are confronted with an "elemental" imagination often higher than that of more productive poets. Modern singers excel in richness of phrase, redundant imagery, elaborate word-painting; but every period has its forerunners and masters, and our rising men must acknowledge Bryant as a laurelled master of the early American School. He seldom touched the keys, yet organ tone.

*How far
Bryant's
work may
be com-
mended.*

*The de-
scriptive
passages.*

*Od. V.,
43-74*

something in the old bard himself which his admirers called Homeric ; and there were these traits, at least, common to the genius of the epics and that of their translator, — a primitive way of regarding things, a stately utterance, a vision clear and suited to the theme. The best characteristics of Bryant's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are : (1), general, though not invariable, fidelity to the text, as compared with former versions by poets of equal rank ; (2), simplicity of phrase and style ; (3), approximate transfusion of the heroic spirit ; (4), a purity of language that pleases a sensible reader. It is not likely that Bryant possessed a scholar's mastery of even the familiar Ionic Greek, but the text of Homer long has been substantially agreed upon by European editors, there are special lexicons devoted to it, and it is faithfully rendered in German and English translations : so that the poet could have little trouble in adjusting it to his metrical needs. His choice of words is meagre, and so — in a modern sense — was that of Homer ; there is no lack of minstrels, nowadays, who ransack their vocabularies to fill our jaded ears with "words, words, words." As a presentment of standard English the value of these translations is beyond serious cavil. When they are compared with the most faithful and poetic blank-verse rendering which preceded them, the work of Cowper, they show an advance in both accuracy and poetic quality. Lord Derby's contemporaneous version is dull and inferior. Bryant naturally handled to best advantage his descriptive passages, — the verses in the Fifth Odyssey, which narrate the visit of Hermes to Calypso, furnishing a case in point. His rendering of these is more literal than the favorite transcript by Leigh Hunt, and excels all others in ease and choice of language. The following extract from another pas-

sage will show how well he occasionally substitutes, for the Greek color and rising harmony, the gloom and vigor of our Saxon tongue :—

“ The steady wind
Swelled out the canvas in the midst ; the ship
Moved on, the dark sea roaring round her keel,
As swiftly through the waves she cleft her way.
And when the rigging of that swift black ship
Was firmly in its place, they filled their cups
With wine, and to the ever-living gods
Poured out libations, most of all to one,
Jove's blue-eyed daughter. Thus through all that night
And all the ensuing morn they held their way.”

*Od. II.
427-434*

Very often, in fact, where the original text is high-sounding and polysyllabic, he obtains his English effect by reliance upon the strength of monosyllabic words :—

“ For his is the black doom of death, ordained
By the great gods.”

“ Hear me yet more :
When she shall smite thee with her wand, draw forth
Thy good sword from thy thigh and rush at her
As if to take her life, and she will crouch
In fear.”

“ I hate
To tell again a tale once fully told.”

But occasionally he uses to advantage the Latinism peculiar to his reflective poems. Such lines as Shakespeare's

“ The multitudinous seas incarnadine ”

show by what process the twin forces of our language are fully brought in play. Verses of this sort, formed by the juxtaposition of the numerous Greek particles with ringing derivative and compound words, make up a good deal of the Homeric song. Bryant accordingly varied his translation with lines which remind us of “Thanatopsis” or “A Forest Hymn” :—

*Style and
language.*

"The innumerable nations of the dead."

"That strength and these unconquerable hands."

"And downward plunged the unmanageable rock."

His paraphrases of the Greek idioms are noticeable for English idiomatic purity, so much so that the idea of a translation frequently absents itself from the reader's mind. While in one respect this is the perfection of such work, in another it is the loss of that charm pertaining to the sense of all rare things which are foreign to our own mode and period. His restraint, also, is carried to the verge of sterility by the repetition of certain adjectives as the equivalents of Greek words varying among themselves. The words "glorious" and "sagacious," for example, not uncommon in this translation, do not always represent the same, or even synonymous, expressions in the original text. But some of his epithets and renderings, such as "the large-souled Ulysses," "the unfruitful sea," "passed into the Underworld," and his retention of Cowper's paraphrase of γέρον δλιος, "the Ancient of the Deep," give a more elevated and poetical tone to the work.

It must be acknowledged that these translations, executed without haste or rest during eight years of an old man's life, are not without dignity and value. The question is debatable whether there was any real need of a new rendering of Homer into our rhymeless iambic pentameter. If so, did Mr. Bryant's labors fill the void? It was proper and natural that he should make blank-verse the vehicle for his use, as the one above all others in which he was sure to reach a measure of success. And had Tennyson undertaken the full translation of Homer, after the manner indicated by

The measures chosen for this translation.

sult. Bryant's verse is noticeably different from that of Tennyson. Only in an occasional passage, like the following, the one reminds us of the other:—

"The formidable baldric, on whose band
Of gold were sculptured marvels,—forms of bears,
Wild boars, grim lions, battles, skirmishings,
And death by wounds, and slaughter."

Yet in every blank-verse rendering there is an inefficacy, — least felt, perhaps, in those elevated passages, the fiery glow of which for a time lifts us above contemplation of the translator's art. In the more mechanical portions blank-verse cannot of itself, by the music and flexibility of its structure, have the converse effect of holding us above the level of the theme. Here the deficiency is painful; and for this reason, amongst others, that in Greek the names of the most common objects are imposing and melodious. Those lines whose poverty of thought is greatest, upborne by the long roll of the hexameter, have a quality as aristocratic as the grace and dignity of a Spanish beggar. A translator discovers the weakness of blank-verse in those intercalary lines which are such a feature in Homer, and which constitute a kind of refrain, affording rest at intervals along the torrent of the song. In the best lyric and epic poetry of all nations a disdain of minor changes is observable; but Bryant, seeing that blank-verse does little honor to a purely mechanical office, often varied his translations of such lines, instead of following the Homeric method of recurrence to one chosen form. The very directness of his syntax, leading to the rejection, even, of such inversions as Tennyson's

Inefficacy of blank-verse. X

Pronaic lapses.

"To whom replied King Arthur, much in wrath"

made it almost prosaic in this respect. Such lines as

"Telemachus, the prudent, thus rejoined "

"And then discreet Telemachus replied "

"Ulysses, the sagacious, answered her "

are tame substitutes for the courtly and sonorous interludes,

Τὴν δ' αὖ Τηλέμαχος πεπνυμένος ἀντίον ἦδδα·

Τὴν δ' ἀπαμειβόμενος προσέφη πολύμητις Ὀδυσσεύς·

We feel still more the shortcomings of blank-verse in the paraphrases of those resonant dactylic lines, which make up so large a portion of the Iliad and Odyssey, and give splendor to the movement of whole cantos. We might cite innumerable examples, like the following:—

Ἥμος δ' ἠριγένεια φάος ῥοδοδάκτυλος Ἥως.

"But when the Morn,

The rosy-fingered child of Dawn, looked forth."

Αὐτὰρ ἔπει ποταμῶιο λίπεν ῥόον Ὀκεανοῖο

Νηῦς, ἀπὸ δ' ἔκετο κύμα θαλάσσης εὐρυπύροιο.

"Now when our bark had left Oceanus

And entered the great deep."

Lack of
movement.

All this points to the one deficiency in a blank-verse translation, and this, unquestionably, relates to the *movement*. Can a version in our slow and stately iambs, which are perfectly adequate to represent the dialogue of the Greek dramas, approximate to the rhythmic effect of a measure which originally was chanted or intoned? The rush of epic song has been caught by Chapman, in his "Iliads," and to some extent by Pope and others, at the expense of matter and style. But only in one instance, that I now recall, has modern blank-verse attained to anything like the Homeric swiftness. I refer to the

Cp. "Victorian Poets":
p. 166.

'ENGLISH HEXAMETER.'

tournament scene, which closes the fifth "The Princess." Even the splendid music of this passage is unrestful, and like the of a racer that can win by a dash, but bottom needed for a three-mile heat.

To the present date I know of no metric of Greek hexameter text, epic or idyllic brief experiments like one or two of (treys), that can vie in beauty and fidelity of prose rendering of Homer by Butcher and with Mr. Lang's exquisite translation of Bion, and Moschus.

There are two of our metrical forms which, I think, the Homeric *rhythmus* may be more closely approached than by the means of blank verse. A good objection has been made to the rhythmic measure, as used by Pope (and by Dryden and Virgil), that it disturbs the force of the connecting thoughts not meant to be connected; it causes a "balancing of expression in the line of which it consists, which is wholly foreign to the Homeric style." Professor Hadley suggests that this might be obviated by a return to the measure used by Chaucer, not pausing too often at the end of the line, but frequently running the sentences over the line, the cæsure varied as in blank-verse. This usage was revived by Keats and Leigh Hunt, and is exemplified in William Morris's flowing poetry. Professor Hadley referred for illustration. Chapman's translation of the Odyssey upon this plan, but in a slove not to be compared with his other Homers. There is room, perhaps, for a new translation of Homer into the rhymed Chaucerian verse. Its merits of the so-called "English hexameter"

See "No.
Am. Rev."
CXII.
328.

points of whose argument seem to me irrefutable, that I shall write at no great length upon it here. Professor C. T. Lewis, in his brilliant review of Bryant's Homer, after justly stating that our hexameter verse could not be written classically, says that it is peculiar among English metres, because it is so very like prose. It is less metrical than any form of English verse. "Blank-verse," he adds, "can stoop to the simplest speech without approaching prose." True, but it does not always do so. Run together the opening lines of Bryant's Odyssey, which in Greek are made highly poetical by the structure and sound, and see if they have not a prosaic effect:—

A test.

"Tell me, O Muse, of that sagacious man who, having overthrown the sacred town of Ilium, wandered far and visited the capitals of many nations, learned the customs of their dwellers, and endured great suffering on the deep."

Cp. "Victorian Poets":
p. 251.

Now where, in Mr. Kingsley's "Andromeda,"—a fair specimen of English hexameter, with liquid cadences throughout,—can five lines be made to read like that? In a future chapter, when we come to Longfellow's "Evangeline," it may be worth while to consider the features that this measure is likely to assume. No master has brought it to the perfection which attracts *both* scholars and laymen; yet I am confident that we shall have an English verse of six feet, with the billowy roll of the classical hexameter, and that by its form it will be suited to the reproduction of Homer, line for line. If Bayard Taylor, who, by argument and practice, demonstrated the value of Form to the translator's work, could reach so near his mark in rendering the hundred metres of "Faust," surely there is encouragement for a future attempt to represent more closely the one de-

See Chap.
VI.

fiant measure of heroic song. To the point made that English is too consonantal for such representation, we reply that it is no more consonantal in hexameter than in pentameter verse, and that, of the two kinds, the former is nearer to the verse of Homer. This objection would apply more forcibly to the still harsher German; yet we conceive Voss's Iliad to have given German readers a truer idea of the original than any English translation has conveyed to ourselves.

In a review of Bryant's *Odyssey*, at the date of its completion, I criticised his employment of those Roman names by which the deities of Grecian mythology have been familiarly known. It was a failure to realize the advances in taste and learning even then nearly popularized by Grote, Tennyson, the Brownings, Swinburne, and by younger poets and scholars without end. If Lord Derby in England, and Mr. Bryant in America, had adopted the true nomenclature, the transition speedily would have been complete. But the order of our poet's mind, even in its epic mood, was slow and stately, Latin rather than Grecian. Hence, as a translator from the Spanish he was successful, reproducing the calm and royal quality of Castilian song.

See "*The Atlantic Monthly*," May, 1872.

VII.

AMERICAN poets have been true to their own land in expressing its innate freedom, patriotism, aspiring resolve. Throughout Bryant's life his scattered poems upon political events, at home and abroad, have been consecrated to freedom and its devotees. He breathed a spirit of independence with the wind of his native hills. The country is the open wild of liberty. All our poets of nature are poets of human rights. Should

Poets of freedom.

*Bryant's
poem on
the Emancipation.*

America ever become monarchical it will be due to the influence of cities and those bred in them. Bryant's regard for law, for the inheritance of just political and social systems, was unquestionable. He might have been a constitutionalist in France ; here, though bred a Federalist, he was sure to oppose undue centralization. After all, he was of no party further than he conceived it to be right. Witness his contest with slavery and his desertion of a Democracy which finally, he thought, belied its name. That he did not, with Lowell and Whittier, summon his muse to oppose the greatest wrong of our history was owing to two causes : First, it was his lyrical habit to observe and idealize general principles, the abstract rather than the concrete. Whittier's poems are alive with incident, and burn with personal feeling. Once, only, Bryant wrote a mighty poem on Slavery : when it had received its death-blow, when the struggle ended and the right prevailed. Jehovah had conquered, His children were free, and Bryant raised a chant like that of Miriam, —

"O thou great Wrong, that, through the slow-paced years,
Didst hold thy millions fettered ;

"Go, now, accursed of God, and take thy place
With hateful memories of the elder time !

"Lo ! the foul phantoms, silent in the gloom
Of the flown ages, part to yield thee room."

This swelling poem, "The Death of Slavery," was not needed to assure us that the cause of freedom touched his heart. For, secondly, his true counterpart to Whittier's work was to be found in the vigorous antislavery assaults he made for years in the journal of which he died the editor. There it was that he

rebuke of fraud and oppression of whatever clime or race."

His prose labors were an outlet, constantly afforded in his journalism, through which much of that energy escaped which otherwise would have varied the motives and increased the body of his song. On the whole, though he was without a philologist's equipment, there were few better writers of simple, nervous English. He made it for half a century the instrument of his every-day thought and purpose ; as a leader-writer, a traveller and correspondent, an essayist and orator, a political disputant. His polemic vigor and acerbity were worked off in his middle-life editorials, and in defence of what he thought to be right. There he was, indeed, unyielding, and other pens recall the traditions of his political controversies. He never confused the distinct provinces of prose and verse. Refer to anything written by him, of the former kind, and you find plainness, well-constructed syntax, free from any cheap gloss of rhetoric or the "jingle of an effeminate rhythm."

His prose labors.

As in written prose and verse, so in speech and public offices. The long series of addresses on civic occasions closed with one which brought him to his death. Mastering his work to the very end, it was his lot at last to bow, as became a poet of Nature, before her own life-nurturing, life-destroying forces, and thus submit to her kindest universal law. The question of a passage in "An Evening Revery" was answered, and the prophecy fulfilled:—

*W. C. B.
died in
New York,
N. Y.,
June 12,
1878.*

"O thou great Movement of the Universe,
Or Change, or Flight of Time — for ye are one !
That bearest, silently, this visible scene
Into night's shadow and the streaming rays
Of starlight, whither art thou bearing me ?

I feel the mighty current sweep me on,
Yet know not whither. Man foretells afar
The courses of the stars ; the very hour
He knows when they shall darken or grow bright ;
Yet doth the eclipse of Sorrow and of Death
Come unforewarned."



CHAPTER IV.

JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER.

I.

A PLEASANT story, that went the round shortly after the close of our Civil War, shows the character of Whittier's hold upon his countrymen. It was said that one among a group of prominent men, when conversation on politics and finance began to lag, asked the question, Who is the best American poet? Horace Greeley, who was of the party, replied with the name of Whittier, and his judgment was instantly approved by all present. These active, practical Americans, patriots or demagogues, — some of them, doubtless, of the "heated barbarian" type, — for once found their individual preferences thus expressed and in accord. At that climacteric time the Pleiad of our elder poets was complete and shining, — not a star was lost. But the instinct of these stern, hard-headed men was in favor of the Quaker bard, the celibate and prophetic recluse; he alone appealed to the poetic side of their natures. We do not hold a press item to absolute exactness in its report of words. The epithet "best" may not have been employed by the questioner on that occasion; were it not for the likelihood that those to whom he spoke would not have laid much stress upon verbal distinctions, one might guess that he said the most national, or representative, or inborn, of our poets. The value of the incident remains; it was discovered

His standing with typical Americans of his own time.

English
opinion :
" *Pall
Mall Ga-
zette*,"
Jan. 30,
1882.

How far a
national
poet.

See pp. 5-
10.

that Whittier most nearly satisfied the various poetic needs of the typical, resolute Americans, men of his own historic generation, who composed that assemblage.

With this may be considered the fact that it is the habit of compilers and brief reviewers, whose work is that of generalization, to speak of him as a "thoroughly American" poet. An English critic, in a notice marked by comprehension of our home-spirit, and with the honest effort of a delicate mind to get at the secret of Whittier's unstudied verse, and gain the best that can be gained from it, finds him to be the "most national" of our writers, and the most characteristic through his extraordinary fluency, narrow experience, and wide sympathy,—language which implies a not unfriendly recognition of traits which have been thought to be American,—loquacity, provincialism, and generosity of heart.

In sentiments thus spoken and written there is a good deal of significance. But the words of the foreign verdict cannot be taken precisely as they stand. Has there been a time, as yet, when any writer could be thoroughly American? What is the meaning of the phrase,—the most limited meaning which a citizen, true to our notion of this country's future, will entertain for a moment? Assuredly not a quality which is collegiate, like Longfellow's, or of a section, like Whittier's, or of a special and cultured class, which alone can enjoy Whitman's sturdy attempt to create a new song for the people before the accepted and accepting time. During the period of these men America scarcely has been more homogeneous in popular characteristics than in climate and topography. I have

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*A test of
this state-
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*New Eng-
land's in-
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upon the
country at
large.*

to enable a scholar, turned farmer, to extract the richest products of a soil ; and the lyric fervor of Lowell's odes is our most imaginative expression of that New England sentiment which has extended itself, an ideal influence, with the movement of its inheritors to the farthest West. Emerson, on his part, has volatilized the essence of New England thought into wreaths of spiritual beauty. Yet Mr. Parkman, than whom no scholar is less given to looseness of expression, terms Whittier the poet of New England, as if by eminence, and I think with exceeding justice. The title is based on apt recognition of evidence that we look to the people at large for the substance of national or sectional traits. The base, not the peak, of the pyramid determines its bearings. There is, to be sure, as much human nature in the mansion as in the cottage, in the study or drawing-room as in the shop and field. But just as we call those *genre* canvases, whereon are painted idyls of the fireside, the roadside, and the farm, pictures of "real life," so we find the true gauge of popular feeling in songs that are dear to the common people and true to their unsophisticated life and motive.

Here we again confront the statement that the six Eastern States were not and are not America ; not the nation, but a section, — the New Englanders seeming almost a race by themselves. But what a section ! And what a people, when we take into account, superadded to their genuine importance, a self-dependence ranking with that of the Scots or Gascons ! As distinct a people, in their way, as Mr. Cable's Creoles, old or new. Go by rail along the Eastern coast, and note the nervous, wiry folk that crowd the stations ; — their eager talk, their curious scrutiny of ordinary persons and incidents, make it easy to believe that the

trait chosen by Sprague for the subject of his didactic poem still is a chief motor of New England's progress, and not unjustly its attribute by tradition. This hive of individuality has sent out swarms, and scattered its ideas like pollen throughout the northern belt of our States. As far as these have taken hold, modified by change and experience, New England stands for the nation, and her singer for the national poet. In their native, unadulterated form, they pervade the verse of Whittier. It is notable that the sons of the Puritans should take their songs from a Quaker; yet how far unlike, except in the doctrine of non-resistance, were the Puritans and Quakers of Endicott's time? To me, they seem grounded in the same inflexible ethics, and alike disposed to supervise the ethics of all mankind. Time and culture have tempered the New England virtues; the Eastern frugality, independence, propagandism, have put on a more attractive aspect; a sense of beauty has been developed, — the mental recognition of it finally granted to a northern race, who still lack the perfect flexibility and grace observable wherever that sense comes by nature and directs the popular conscience. As for the rural inhabitants of New England, less changed by travel and accomplishments, we know what they were and are, — among them none more affectionate, pious, resolute, than Whittier, beyond doubt their representative poet.

He belongs, moreover, — and hence the point of the incident first related, — to the group now rapidly disappearing, of which Horace Greeley was a conspicuous member, and to an epoch that gave its workers little time for over-refinement, Persian apparatus, and the cultivation of æsthetics. That group of scarred and hardy speakers, journalists, agitators, felt that he was of them, and found his song revealing the highest

*A notable
constituen-
cy.*

*

purpose of their boisterous, unsentimental careers. These men — like all men who do not retrograde — had an ideal. This he expressed, in measures that moved them, and whose perfection they had no thought or faculty of questioning. Many of them came from obscure and rural homes, and to read his verse was to recall the scent of the clover and apple-bloom, to hear again the creak of the well-pole, the rattle of the bars in the lane, — the sights and freshness of youth passing for a moment, a vision of peace, over their battlefield. They needed, also, their own pibroch and battle-cry, and this his song rang out ; their determination was in it, blended with the tenderness from which such men are never wholly free.

*The bard
of an his-
toric time.*

His ultimate reputation, then, will be inseparable from that of his section and its class. He may not hold it as one of those whose work appeals to all times and races, and whose art is so refined as to be the model of after-poets. But he was the singer of what was not an empty day, and of a section whose movement became that of a nation, and whose purpose in the end was grandly consummated. We already see, and the future will see it more clearly, that no party ever did a vaster work than his party ; that he, like Hampden and Milton, is a character not produced in common times ; that no struggle was more momentous than that which preceded our Civil War, no question ever affected the destinies of a great people more vitally than the antislavery issue, as urged by its promoters. Neither Greece nor Rome, not even England, the battle-ground of Anglo-Saxon liberty, has supplied a drama of more import than that in which the poets and other heroes of our Civil Reformation played their parts.

II.

WHITTIER'S origin and early life were auspicious for one who was to become a poet of the people. His muse shielded him from the relaxing influence of luxury and superfine culture. These could not reach the primitive homestead in the beautiful Merrimack Valley, five miles out from the market-town of Haverhill, where all things were elementary and of the plainest cast. The training of the Friends made his boyhood still more simple ; otherwise, as I have said, it mattered little whether he derived from Puritan or Quaker sources. Still, it was much, in one respect, to be descended from Quakers and Huguenots used to suffer and be strong for conscience' sake. It placed him years in advance of the comfortable Brahmin class, with its blunted sense of right and wrong, and, to use his own words, turned him "so early away from what Roger Williams calls 'the world's great trinity, pleasure, profit, and honor,' to take side with the poor and oppressed." The Puritans conformed to the rule of the Old Testament, the Friends to the spirit of the New. One has only to read our colonial annals to know how the Jews got on under the Mosaic law, inasmuch as to the end of the Mather dynasty the pandect of Leviticus, in all its terror, was sternly enforced by church and state. The Puritans had two gods, Deus and Diabolus ; the Quakers recognized the former alone, and chiefly through his incarnation as the Prince of Peace. They exercised, however, the right of interference with other people's code and practice, after a fashion the more intolerable from a surrender of the right to establish their own by rope and sword. Whittier's Quaker strain, as Frothingham has shown, yielded him wholly to the "intellectual pas-

*John
Greenleaf
Whittier :
born near
Haverhill,
Mass.,
Dec. 17,
1807.*

*The
Puritans
and the
Quakers.*

*The poet's
Quaker-
ism.*

sion" that Transcendentalism aroused, and still keeps him obedient to the Inward Light. And it made him a poet militant, a crusader whose moral weapons, since he must disown the carnal, were keen of edge and seldom in their scabbards. The fire of his deep-set eyes, whether betokening, like that of his kinsman Webster, the Batchelder blood, or inherited from some old Feuillevert, strangely contrasts with the benign expression of his mouth, — that firm serenity, which by transmitted habitude dwells upon the lips of the sons and daughters of peace.

*Youth on
the farm.*

There was no affectation in the rusticity of his youth. It was the real thing, — the neat and saving homeliness of the Eastern farm. All the belongings of the household were not the equivalent of a week's expenses in a modern city home, yet there was no want and nothing out of tone. We see the wooden house and barn, set against the background of rugged acres; indoors, still the loom and wheel, and still the Quaker mother, dear old toiling one, the incarnation of faith and charity, beloved by a loyal, bright-eyed family group. There was little to read but the Bible, "Pilgrim's Progress," and the weekly newspaper; no schooling but in the district school-house; nothing to learn of the outer world except from the eccentric and often picturesque strollers that in those days peddled, sang, or fiddled from village to village. Yet the boy's poetic fancy and native sense of rhythm were not inert. He listened eagerly to the provincial traditions and legends, a genuine folk-lore, recounted by his elders at the fireside; and he began to put his thoughts in numbers at the earliest possible age. A great stimulus came in the shape of Burns's poems, a cheap volume of which fell into his possession by

*Influence
of Burns.*

His first printed efforts were an imitation of the dialect and measures of the Scottish bard, and perhaps no copybook could have been more suitable until he formed his own hand—a time not long postponed. He well might have fancied that in his experience there was much in common with that of his master; that he, too, might live to affirm, though surely in words less grandiloquent, “The Genius of Poetry found me at the plough, and threw her inspiring mantle over me.” Of our leading poets, he was almost the only one who learned Nature by working with her at all seasons, under the sky and in the wood and field. So much for his boyhood; his after course was affected greatly by the man then coming into notice as a fanatic and agitator, the lion-hearted champion of freedom, long since glorified with the name he gave to his first pronouncement, the *Liberator*. A piece of verse sent by young Whittier to the Newburyport “Free Press” led Garrison, its editor, to look up his contributor, and to encourage him with praise and counsel. From that time we see the poet working upward in the old-fashioned way. A clever youth need not turn gauger in a land of schools and newspapers. Whittier’s training was supplemented by a year or more at the academy, and by a winter’s practice as a teacher himself,—fulfilling thus the customary *Lehrjahre* of our village aspirants. In another year we find him the conductor of a tariff newspaper in Boston. Before his twenty-fifth birthday he had experienced the vicissitudes of old-time journalism, changing from one desk to another, at Haverhill, Boston, and Hartford, still pursuing literature, erelong somewhat known as a poet and sketch-writer, and near the close of this period issuing his first book of *Legends*, in prose and verse. At Hartford also he edited, with

First acquaintance with William Lloyd Garrison.

See p. 114.

*Consecra-
tion to the
anti-slav-
ery strug-
gle.*

a well-composed preface, the posthumous collection of his friend Brainard's poems.

But the mission of his life now came upon him. He received a call. In 1831 Garrison had begun "The Liberator." He was Whittier's ally and guide; the ardor of the poet required an heroic purpose, and Garrison's crusade was one to which his whole nature inclined him. It was no personal ambition that made him the psalmist of the new movement. His verses, crude as they were, had gained favor; he already had a name, and a career was predicted for him. He now doomed himself to years of retardation and disfavor, and had no reason to foresee the honors they would bring him in the end. What he tells us is the truth: "For twenty years my name would have injured the circulation of any of the literary or political journals in the country." During this term his imaginative writings were to be "simply episodical," something apart from what he says had been the main purpose of his life. He was bent upon the service which led Samuel May to declare that of all our poets he "has, from first to last, done most for the abolition of slavery. All my anti-slavery brethren, I doubt not, will unite with me to crown him as our laureate." Bryant, many years later, pointed out that in recent times the road of others to literary success had been made smooth by anti-slavery opinions, adding that in Whittier's case the reverse of this was true; that he made himself the champion of the slave "when to say aught against the national curse was to draw upon one's self the bitterest hatred, loathing, and contempt of the great majority of men throughout the land." Unquestionably Whittier's ambition, during his novitiate, had been to do something as a poet and man of letters.

Not that he had learned what few, in fact, at that time realized, that the highest art aims at creative beauty, and that devotion, repose, and calm are essential to the mastery of an ideal. But he was a natural poet, and, if he had not been filled with convictions, might have reached this knowledge as soon as others who possessed the lyrical impulse. The fact that he made his rarest gift subsidiary to his new purpose, in the flush of early reputation, when one is most sensitive to popular esteem, has led me to dwell a little upon the story of his life, and to observe how life itself may be made no less inspiring than a poem. I would not be misunderstood; we measure poetry at its worth, not at the worth of its maker. This is the law; yet in Whittier's record, if ever, there is an appeal to the higher law that takes note of exceptions. Some of his verse, as a pattern for verse hereafter, is not what it might have been if he had consecrated himself to poetry as an art; but it is memorably connected with historic times, and his rudest shafts of song were shot true and far and tipped with flame. This should make it clear to foreigners why we entertain for him a measure of the feeling with which Hungarians speak of Petöfi, and Russians of Turgénieff. His songs touched the hearts of his people. It was the generation which listened in childhood to the *Voices of Freedom* that fulfilled their prophecies.

Garrison started his journal with the watchword of "unconditional emancipation," and the pledge to be "harsh as truth and uncompromising as justice; . . . not to retreat a single inch, and to be heard." Whittier reënforced him with lyre and pen, — though sometimes the two differed in policy, — and soon was writing abolition pamphlets, editing "The Freeman,"

His gift subsidiary to "the cause."

"The Voices of Freedom," 1849, etc., etc.

Record and experience.

*In the
field.*

and active in the thick of the conflict. He was the secretary of the first anti-slavery convention, a signer of the Declaration of Sentiments, and, at an age when bardlings are making sonnets to a mistress's eyebrow, he was facing mobs at Plymouth, Boston, Philadelphia. After seven or eight years of this stormy service, he settled down in quarters at Amesbury, sending out, as ever, his prose and verse to forward the cause. But now his humane and fervent motives were understood even by opponents, and the sweetness of his rural lyrics and idyls had testified for him as a poet. In 1843 the most eclectic of publishing houses welcomed him to its list; the rise of poetry had set in, and Longfellow, Emerson, Lowell, were gaining a constituency. As he grew in favor, attractive editions of his poems appeared, and his later volumes came from the press as frequently as Longfellow's, — more than one of them, like "Snow-Bound," receiving in this country as warm and wide a welcome as those of the Cambridge laureate. After the war, Garrison — at last crowned with honor, and rejoicing in the consummation of his work — was seldom heard. Whittier, in his hermitage, the resort of many pilgrims, has steadily renewed his song. While chanting in behalf of every patriotic or humane effort of his time, he has been the truest singer of our homestead and wayside life, and has rendered all the legends of his region into familiar verse. The habit of youth has clung to him, and he often misses, in his too facile rhyme and rhythm, the graces, the studied excellence of modern work. But all in all, as we have seen, and more than others, he has read the heart of New England, and expressed the convictions of New England at her height of moral supremacy, — the distinctive enjoyment of

*After the
campaign.*

↓

which, in view of the growth of the Union, and the spread of her broods throughout its territory, may not recur again.

III.

It would not be fair to test Whittier by the quality of his off-hand work. His verse always was auxiliary to what he deemed the main business of his life, and has varied with the occasions that inspired it. His object was not the artist's, to make the occasion serve his poem, but directly the reverse. Perhaps his *naïveté* and carelessness more truthfully spoke for his constituents than the polish of those bred in seats of culture; many of his stanzas reflect the homeliness of a provincial region, and are the spontaneous outcome of what poetry there was in it. His feeling gained expression in simple speech and the forms which came readily. Probably it occurred somewhat late to the mind of this pure and duteous enthusiast that there is such a thing as duty to one's art, and that diffuseness, bad rhymes, and prosaic stanzas are alien to it. Nor is it strange that the artistic moral sense of a Quaker poet, reared on a New England farmstead, at first should be deficient. A careless habit, once formed, made it hard for him to master the touch that renders a new poem by this or that expert a standard, and its appearance an event. His ear and voice were naturally fine, as some of his early work plainly shows. "Cassandra Southwick," "The New Wife and the Old," and "The Virginia Slave Mother" were of an original flavor and up to the standards of that day. If he had occupied himself wholly with poetic work, he would have grown as steadily as his most successful compeers. But his

*Unstudied
quality of
his verse.*

Its defects

x

*Hasty
composition.*

Cp. "Victorian Poets": pp. 81, 82.

vocation became that of trumpeter to the impetuous reform brigade. He supplied verse on the instant, often full of vigor, but often little more than the rallying-blast of a passing campaign. We are told by May that "from 1832 to the close of our dreadful war in 1865, his harp of liberty was never hung up. Not an important occasion escaped him. Every significant incident drew from his heart some pertinent and often very impressive or rousing verses." It is safe to assume that if he had been more discriminating, or had cherished the resolve of Longfellow or Tennyson to make even conventional pieces artistic, many occasions would have escaped him. We see again that Art will forego none of its attributes. Sincerity and spontaneity are the well-springs of its clearest flow; yet, if dependent on these traits alone, it may become cheap and common, and utterly fail of permanence. In the time under notice there was nothing more likely to confuse the imagination than the life of a journalist, especially of a provincial or reform editor. The case of Hood, one of the truest of poets by nature, has shown us something of the dangers that beset a journalist-poet. This Whittier emphatically became, though in every way superior to the band of temperance, abolition, and partisan rhymesters that, like the shadows of his own failings, sprang up in his train. He wrote verses very much as he wrote editorials, and they were forcible only when he was deeply moved by stirring crises and events. Some of his best were tributes to leaders, or rebukes of great men fallen. But he was too apt to write weak eulogies of obscurer people; for every friend or ally had a claim upon his muse.

His imperfections were those of his time and class, and he was too engrossed with a mission to overcome

them. He never learned compression, and still is troubled more with fatal fluency than our other poets of equal rank, — by an inability to reject poor stanzas and to stop at the right place. Mrs. Browning was a prominent sufferer in this respect. The two poets were so much alike, with their indifference to method and taste, as to suggest the question (especially in view of the subaltern reform-verse-makers) whether advocates of causes, and other people of great moral zeal, are not relatively deficient in artistic conscientiousness and in what may be called æsthetic rectitude.

*The Poets
of Reform.*

An occasional looseness in matters of fact may be forgiven one who writes from impulse. We owe "Barbara Frietchie" to the glow excited by a newspaper report; and the story of "Skipper Ireson's Ride," now challenged, if not true, is too well told to be lost. Whittier became, like a mother's careless, warm-hearted child, dearer for his very shortcomings. But they sometimes mar his bravest outbursts. Slight changes would have made that eloquent lyric, "Randolph of Roanoke," a perfect one. Feeling himself a poet, he sang by ear alone, in a somewhat primitive time; but the finest genius, in music or painting for example, with the aid of a commonplace teacher can get over more ground in a month than he would cover unaided in a year; since the teacher represents what is already discovered and established. There came a period when Whittier's verse was composed solely with poetic intent, and after a less careless fashion. It is chiefly that portion of it, written from 1860 onward, that has secured him a more than local reputation. His ruder rhymes of a day bear witness to an experience which none could better illustrate than by citing the words of the poet himself:

*Culture an
aid to genius.*

"Hater of din and riot,
He lived in days unquiet;
And, lover of all beauty,
Trod the hard ways of duty."

*Prose
writings.*

"*Margaret
Smith's
Journal*,"
1849.

In prose he soon became skilled. His letters often are models of epistolary style; the best articles and essays from his pen are written with a true and direct hand, though rather barren of the epigram and original thought which enrich the prose of Lowell, Holmes, and Emerson. *Margaret Smith's Journal* is a charming *nuova antica*; a trifle thin in plot, but such a quaint reproduction of the early colonial period — its people, manners, and discourse — as scarcely any other author save Hawthorne, at the date of its production, could have given us.

IV.

*Whittier's
poetical
style, gen-
ius, and
works.*

HIS metrical style, except in certain lyrics of marked individuality, is that of our elders who wrote in diffuse measures, and whose readers favored sentiment more than beauty or wit. It is a degree more old-fashioned than styles which are so much older as to become new by revival; that is to say, its fashion was current within our own recollection and is now passing away. Some forms put on a new type with each successive period, such as blank-verse and the irregular ode-measures in which Lowell, Taylor, and Stoddard have been successful. Whittier uses these rarely, and to less advantage than his ballad-verse. He has conformed less than any one but Holmes to the changes of the day. Imagine him with an etching-needle, tracing the deft lines of a triolet or villanelle! If he could, and would, it would be seen that when one leaves a natural vein, the yield, lacking what is

characteristic, is superfluous. Even his recent sonnets, "Requirement," "Help," etc., are little more than fourteen-line homilies. Those who know their author find something of him in them, but such efforts do not reveal him to a new acquaintance. A poet's voice must have a distinct quality to be heard above the general choir.

We turn to his early verse, as still acknowledged, to see in what direction his first independent step was made, and we note an effort to become a true American poet — to concern himself with the story and motive of his own land. For a time it was rather ineffective. The author of *Mogg Megone* and *The Bridal of Pennacook* was on the same trail with the New York squadron that sought the red man's path. It is queer, at this distance, to see the methods of Scott and Coleridge applied to the Indian legendary of Maine. Among works of this sort, however, these were the best preceding "Hiawatha." Longfellow had the tact to perceive that if the savage is not poetical his folk-lore may be made so. The prelude to Whittier's "Bridal" is quite modern and natural. It contains a suggestive plea that this experiment in a home field may not seem amiss even to those who are best pleased

"while wandering in thought,
Pilgrims of Romance o'er the olden world."

And, after all, "Mogg" was a planned and sustained effort, and full of promise. Its writer's later management of local themes was more to the point. The *Songs of Labor* are American chiefly in topic, — in manner they are much like what Mackay or Massey might have written, — yet they became popular, and their rhetorical flow adapted them to recitation in the

*A whole-
some in-
tent.*

"*Mogg
Megone*,"
1836.

"*The
Bridal of
Pennacook*,"
1848.

"*Songs of
Labor*,"
1850.

*Indica-
tions of his
true bent.*

*Our fore-
most bal-
ladist.*

country schools. The poet's distinctive touch first appears in the legendary ballads which now precede the "Voices of Freedom" in his late editions. "The New Wife and the Old" is almost our best specimen of a style that Mrs. Hemans affected, and which Miss Ingelow, Mrs. Browning, and others have employed more picturesquely. It is a weird legend, musically told, and clearly the lyric of a poet. The early Quaker pieces are as good, and have all the traits of his verse written forty years afterward. His first ballads give the clew to his genius, and now make it apparent that most of his verse may be considered without much regard to dates of production. "Cassandra Southwick," alone, showed where his strength lay: of all our poets he is the most natural balladist, and Holmes comes next to him. The manner of that poem doubtless was suggested by Macaulay's "Battle of Ivry," and nothing could better serve the purpose. The colonial tone is well maintained. Here is a touching picture of the inspired maid's temptation to recant, of her endurance, trial, and victory. A group, also, of the populace — cloaked citizens, grave and cold, hardy sea-captains, and others — gathered where

"on his horse, with Rawson, his cruel clerk, at hand,
Sat dark and haughty Endicott, the ruler of the land."

The bigoted priest, a "smiter of the meek," is a type that was to reappear in our poet's scornful indictments of the divines who, within public remembrance, upheld the slavery system under the sanction of Noah's curse of Canaan. This ballad is well-proportioned, and thus escapes the defect of "The Exiles," which is otherwise a good piece of idiomatic verse.

On the whole, it is as a balladist that Whittier displays a sure metrical instinct. The record of the Quakers has always served his muse, from the date of "Cassandra Southwick" to the recent production of "The Old South," "The King's Missive," and "How the Women went from Dover." Neither Bernard Barton nor Bayard Taylor is so well entitled to the epithet of the Quaker Poet. His Quaker strains, chanted while the sect is slowly blending with the world's people, seem like its swan-song. It is worth noting that of the nine American poets discussed in these essays, one is still a Friend, and two others, Whitman and Taylor, came of Quaker parentage on both sides. The strong ballad, "Barclay of Ury," would be almost perfect but for the four moralizing stanzas at the close. It is annoying to see a fine thing lowered, and even in moral effect, by an offence against the ethics of art. Whittier's successes probably have been scored most often through ballads of our eastward tradition and supernaturalism, such as those pertaining to witchcraft, — a province which, from "Calef in Boston" to "The Witch of Wenham," he never has long neglected. Some of his miscellaneous ballads are idyllic; others, in strong relief, were inspired by incidents of the War, during which our non-combatant sounded more than one blast, like that of Roderick, worth a thousand men. His ballads vary as much in excellence as in kind; among the most noteworthy are "Mary Garvin," "Parson Avery," "John Underhill," and that pure bit of melody and feeling, the lay of "Marguerite." Yet some of the poems which he classes in this department properly are eclogues, or slow-moving narratives. He handles well a familiar measure; when aiming at something new, as in "The Ranger," he usually is

*Ballads on
Quaker
themes.*

*Ballads of
witch-
craft,
colonial
romance,
etc.*

"Skipper
Ireson's
Ride."

less at ease, despite the fact that the nonpareil of his briefer pieces is thoroughly novel in form and refrain, and doubtless chanced to come to him in such wise. "Skipper Ireson's Ride" certainly is unique. Dialect-poems are too often unfaithful or unpoetic. Imagination, humor, and dramatic force are found in the ballad of the Marblehead skipper's dole, and its movement is admirable. The culmination is more effective than is usual in a piece by Whittier. We have the widow of the skipper's victim saying "God has touched him! why should we?"—an old dame, whose only son has perished, bidding them "Cut the rogue's tether and let him run"; and

"So, with soft relentings and rude excuse,
Half scorn, half pity, they cut him loose,
And gave him a cloak to hide him in,
And left him alone with his shame and sin.
Poor Floyd Ireson, for his hard heart,
Tarred and feathered and carried in a cart
By the women of Marblehead!"

The change of feeling is indicated by the single word "poor." This is only a minor piece, but quantity is the plane, and quality the height, of lyrical verse. Were it not for two of Collins's briefest poems, where would his name be?

(1847.)

"The
Tent on
the
Beach,"
1867.

A balladist should be a good reciter of tales. Our poet's prose work on *The Supernaturalism of New England* was devoted to the ghost and witch stories of his own neighborhood. In general design his chief story-book in verse, *The Tent on the Beach*, like Longfellow's "Tales of a Wayside Inn,"—the first series of which it post-dated and did not equal,—follows the oft-borrowed method of Boccaccio and Chaucer.

*Whittier's
pastoral
spirit.*

✓

still, we feel that he is, intellectually and socially, miles above the people of the vale. Whittier is of their blood, and always the boy-poet of the Essex farm, however advanced in years and fame. They are won by the sincerity and ingenuousness of his verse, rooted in the soil and native as the fern and wild rose of the wayside. His brother-poets are more exact: which of them would hit upon "Maud" as a typical farm-girl's name? But incongruities are the signs manual of a rural bard, as one can discover from Burns's high-sounding letters and manifestoes. Whittier himself despises a sham pastoral. There is good criticism, a clear sense of what was needed, in his paper on Robert Dinsmore, the old Scotch bard of his childhood. He says of rural poetry that "the mere dilettante and the amateur ruralist may as well keep their hands off. The prize is not for them. He who would successfully strive for it must be himself what he sings, — part and parcel of the rural life, . . . one who has added to his book-lore the large experience of an active participation in the rugged toil, the hearty amusements, the trials and pleasures he describes." I need not dwell upon our poet's fidelity to the landscape and legends of the Eastern shore and the vales of the Piscataqua and Merrimack. Those who criticise his pastoral spirit as lacking Bryant's breadth of tone, Emerson's penetration, and Thoreau's detail, confess that it is honest and that it comes by nature. His most vivid pictures are of scenes which lie near his heart, and relate to common life — to the love and longing, the simple joys and griefs, of his neighbors at work and rest and worship. Lyrics such as "Telling the Bees," "Maud Muller," and "My Playmate" are miniature classics; of this kind are those which confirmed his reputation and still make his volumes real household books of song.

‘SNOW-BOUND.’

These rustic verses, as we have seen, came like the sound of falling waters to jaded men and women. Years ago, when *Snow-Bound* was published, I was surprised at the warmth of its reception. I must have underrated it in every way. It did not interest one not long escaped from bounds, to whom the poetry of action then was all in all. And in truth such poetry, conceived and executed in the spirit of art, is of the higher grade. But I now can see my mistake, a purely subjective one, and do justice to “*Snow-Bound*” as a model of its class. Burroughs well avows it to be the “most faithful picture of our northern winter that has yet been put into poetry.” If his discussion had not been restricted to “*Nature and the Poets*,” he perhaps would have added that this pastoral gives, and once for all, an ideal reproduction of the inner life of an old-fashioned American rustic home ; not a peasant-home, — far above that in refinement and potentialities, — but equally simple, frugal, and devout ; a home of which no other land has furnished the coadequate type.

This poem is not rich in couplets to be quoted for their points of phrase and thought. Point, decoration, and other features of modern verse are scarcely characteristic of Whittier. In “*Snow-Bound*” he chose the best subject within his own experience, and he made the most of it. Taken as a whole, it is his most complete production, and a worthy successor to “*The Deserted Village*” and “*The Cotter’s Saturday Night*.” Here is that air which writers of quality so often fail to capture. “*Hermann and Dorothea*,” “*Enoch Arden*,” even “*Evangeline*,” memorable for beauty of another kind, leave the impression that each of their authors said, as Virgil must have said, “*And now I will compose an idyl.*” Whittier found his idyl already pictured for him by the camera of his own heart. It is a

work that can be praised, when measured by others of the sort, as heartily as we praise the "Biglow Papers" or "Evangeline," and one that ranks next to them as an American poem. This "Winter Idyl" is honestly named. Under the title, however, is a passage from Cornelius Agrippa on the "Fire of Wood," followed by Emerson's matchless heralding of the snow-storm. Devices of this kind add to the effect of such a poem, only, as "The Ancient Mariner." The texts are needless at the outset of a work whose lovely and unlit-erary cast is sufficient in itself. From the key struck at the opening to the tender fall at the close, there is a sense of proportion, an adequacy and yet a restraint, not always observed in Whittier. This is a sustained performance that conforms to the maxim *ne quid nimis*. Its genuineness is proved by a severe test, the concord with which imaginative passages glide into homely, realistic verse:

Realism.

"The wind blew east : we heard the roar
Of Ocean on his wintry shore,
And felt the strong pulse throbbing there
Beat with low rhythm our inland air.

"Meanwhile we did our nightly chores, —
Brought in the wood from out of doors,
Littered the stalls, and from the mows
Raked down the herd's-grass for the cows ;
Heard the horse whinnying for his corn ;
And, sharply clashing horn on horn,
Impatient down the stanchion rows
The cattle shake their walnut bows."

The gray day darkens to

"A night made hoary with the swarm
And whirl-dance of the blinding storm ;

The white drift piled the window-frame,

The poet's child-vision makes this fancy natural and not grotesque. The whole transfiguration is recalled :

"The old familiar sights of ours
Took marvellous shapes ; strange domes and towers
Rose up where sty or corn-crib stood,
Or garden-wall, or belt of wood ;

The bridle-post an old man sat
With loose-flung coat and high cocked hat ;
The well-curb had a Chinese roof ;
And even the long sweep, high aloof,
In its slant splendor, seemed to tell
Of Pisa's leaning miracle."

Imaginative touches follow :

"The shrieking of the mindless wind,
The moaning tree-boughs swaying blind,
And on the glass the unmeaning beat
Of ghostly finger-tips of sleet.

From the crest
Of wooded knolls that ridged the west,
The sun, a snow-blown traveller, sank
From sight beneath the smothering bank."

The building and lighting of the wood-fire, the hovering family group that

"watched the first red blaze appear,
Heard the sharp crackle, caught the gleam
On whitewashed wall and sagging beam,"

the rude-furnished room thus glorified and transformed, while even

"The cat's dark silhouette on the wall
A couchant tiger's seemed to fall," —

all this is an interior painted by our Merrimack Teniers. His hand grows free in artless delineations of each sharer of the charmed blockade : the father, with his stories of woodcraft and adventure : the Quaker

Fancy.

Imagination.

A graphic interior.

"of faith fire-winged by martyrdom"; then a foil to these, the unlettered uncle "rich in lore of fields and brooks,"

"A simple, guileless, childlike man,
Content to live where life began";

the maiden aunt; the elder sister, full of self-sacrifice, a true New England girl; lastly, the "youngest and dearest," seated on the braided mat,

"Lifting her large, sweet, asking eyes."

The guests are no less vividly portrayed. The school-master, distinct as Goldsmith's, is of an original type. The group is completed, with an instinct for color and contrast, by the introduction of a dramatic figure, the half-tropical, prophetic woman, who was born to startle,

"on her desert throne,
The crazy Queen of Lebanon
With claims fantastic as her own."

The poem returns to its theme, and records the days of farm-house life during the chill embargo of the snow, until

"a week had passed
Since the great world was heard from last."

But the treading oxen break out the highways, the rustic carnival of sledding and sleighing is at hand,

"Wide swung again our ice-locked door,
And all the world was ours once more."

*The poet's
master-
piece.*

From the subject thus chosen and pursued, an unadventured theme before, our poet has made his masterpiece. Its readers afterward loved to hear his voice, whether at its best or otherwise; and the more so for his pleased and assured reflection,

"And thanks untraced to lips unknown
Shall greet me like the odors blown
From unseen meadows newly mown."

A claim that he has found and preserved in fit and winning verse the poetic aspect of his own section can be grounded safely on this idyl. We return from the work in which his taste is most effectual to that inspired by his life-long convictions. It is in this that the faults heretofore noted are most common, but here also his natural force is at its height, and results from what is lacking in some of his group — the element of passion. The verse of his period, especially the New England verse, is barren enough of this. For what there was, and is, of love-poetry we must look south of the region where poets are either too fortunate or too self-controlled to die because a woman's fair. The song of the Quaker bard is almost virginal, in so far as what we term the master-passion is concerned. Its passion comes from the purpose that heated his soul and both strengthened and impeded lyrical expression. Active service in any strife, even the most humane, is unrest, and therefore hostile to the perfection of art. But the conflict often engenders in its cloud the flash of eloquence and song. Three-fourths of Whittier's anti-slavery lyrics are clearly effusions of the hour; their force was temporal rather than poetic. There are music and pathos in "The Virginia Slave Mother," and "The Slave-Ships" is lurid and grotesque enough to have furnished Turner with his theme. The poet's deep-voiced scorn and invective rendered his anti-slavery verse a very different thing from Longfellow's, and made the hearer sure of his "effectual calling." Even rhetoric becomes the outburst of true passion in such lines as these upon "Elliott": —

"Hands off! thou tithe-fat plunderer! play
No trick of priestcraft here!
Back, puny lordling! darest thou lay
A hand on Elliott's bier?"

The passion of a fiery heart.

*Personal
lyrics.*

"Ichabod."

A little of this, however, goes quite far enough in poetry. As a writer of personal tributes, whether pæans or monodies, the reform bard, with his peculiar faculty of characterization, has been happily gifted. Scarcely one of these that might not be retouched to advantage, but they are many and various and striking. John Randolph lives for us in the just balancing, the masterly and sympathetic portraiture, of Whittier's fine elegy. Channing, Elliott, Pius IX., Foster, Rantoul, Kossuth, Sumner, Garibaldi, — all these historic personages are idealized by this poet, and haloed with their spiritual worth; his tributes are a lyrical commentary, from the minstrel's point of view, upon an epoch now gone by. The wreath his aged hands have laid upon the tomb of Garrison is a beautiful and consecrated offering. One of his memorable improvisations was "Ichabod," the lament for Webster's defection and fall, — a tragical subject handled with lyric power. In after years, his passion tempered by the flood of time, he breathes a tenderer regret in "The Lost Occasion": —

"Thou shouldst have lived to feel below
Thy feet Disunion's fierce upthrow, —
The late-sprung mine that underlaid
Thy sad concessions vainly made.

Ah, cruel fate, that closed to thee,
O sleeper by the Northern sea,
The gates of opportunity!"

But the conception of "Ichabod" is most impressive; those darkening lines were graven too deeply for obliteration. In thought we still picture the deserted leader, the shadow gathering about his "august head," while he reads such words as these: —

"All else is gone; from those great eyes
The soul has fled:

When faith is lost, when honor dies,
The man is dead.

"Then, pay the reverence of old days
To his dead fame ;
Walk backward, with averted gaze,
And hide the shame !"

Among our briefer poems on topics of dramatic general interest, I recall but one which equals this in effect, — and that, coming from a hand less familiar than Whittier's, is now almost unknown. I refer to the "Lines on a Great Man Fallen," written by William W. Lord, after the final defeat of Clay, and in scorn of the popular judgment that to be defeated is to fall. The merit of this eloquent piece has been strangely overlooked by the makers of our literary compilations.

It is matter of history that our strictest clerical monitors, during the early struggle for abolition, opposed agitation of the slavery question, and often with a rancor that Holy Willie might envy. Not even this one-sided *odium theologicum* could long debar Whittier from the respect of the church-going classes, for he is the most religious of secular poets, and there is no gainsaying to a believer the virtues of one who guides his course by the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. A worshipful spirit, a savor "whose fragrance smells to heaven," breathes from these pages of the Preacher-Poet's song. The devotional bent of our ancestors was the inheritance of his generation. Domesticity, patriotism, and religion were, and probably still are, American characteristics often determining an author's success or failure. A reverent feeling, emancipated from dogma and imbued with grace, underlies the wholesome morality of our national poets. No country has possessed a group, equal in talent, that has pre-

Deep religious feeling.

Morality of American verse.

A poet militant and ministrant.

sented more willingly whatsoever things are pure, lovely, and of good report. There is scientific value in an influence, during a race's formative period, so clarifying to the general conscience. We have no proof that the unmorality of a people like the French, with exquisite resources at command, can evolve an art or literature greater than in the end may result from the virile chastity of the Saxon mind. Whittier is the Galahad of modern poets, not emasculate, but vigorous and pure ; he has borne Christian's shield of faith and sword of the Spirit. His steadfast insistence upon the primitive conception of Christ as the ransom of the oppressed had an effect, stronger than argument or partisanship, upon the religiously inclined ; and of his lyrics, more than of those by his fellow-poets, it could be averred that the songs of a people go before the laws. Undoubtedly a flavor smacking of the caucus, the jubilee, and other adjuvants of "the cause" is found in some of his polemic strains ; but again they are like the trumpeting of passing squadrons, or the muffled drum-beat for chieftains fallen in the fray. The courage that endures the imputation of cowardice, as in "Barclay of Ury," the suffering of man for man, the cry of the human, never fail to move him. He celebrates all brave deeds and acts of renunciation. The heroism of martyrs and resisters, of the Huguenots, the Vaudois, the Quakers, the English reformers, serves him for many a song and ballad. At every pause after some new devotion, after some supreme offering by one of his comrades, it was the voice of Whittier that sang the pæan and the requiem. His cry, —

"Thou hast fallen in thine armor,
Thou martyr of the Lord !"

maiden crossing the threshold of dishonor and martyrdom, the crowd crying "Fool!" without, while from within and above a rapturous voice utters the words, "Thou saint!" His sympathy flows to prisoners, emancipationists, throughout the world; and in "The May-Flower" he has a lurking kindness even for the Puritans, — but of the sort that Burns extends to Auld Hornie. This compassion reaches a climax in the lyric of the two angels who are commissioned to ransom hell itself. The injunction to beware of the man of one book applies to the poet whose Bible was interpreted for him by a Quaker mother. Its letter rarely is absent from his verse, and its spirit never. His hymns, than which he composes nothing more spontaneously, are so many acts of faith. The emancipationists certainly fought with the sword in one hand and the Bible in the other, — and Whittier's hymns were on their lips. The time came when these were no longer of hope, but of thanksgiving. Often his sacred numbers, such as the "Invocation," have a sonorous effect and positive strength of feeling. It was by the common choice of our poets that he wrote the "Centennial Hymn"; no one else would venture where the priest of song alone should go. The composition begins imposingly: —

"Our fathers' God! from out whose hand
The centuries fall like grains of sand";

and it is difficult to see how a poem for sacred music, or for such an occasion, could be more adequately wrought.

His occasional and personal pieces reveal his transcendental habit of thought. We find him imagining the after-life of the good, the gifted, the maligned. The actuality of his conceptions is impressive: —

*Hymns of
prayer
and
praise.*

*Transcendental
spirit.*

"I have friends in spirit-land;
Not shadows in a shadowy band,
Not others, but themselves, are they."

The change is only one from twilight into dawn:—

"*Thou livest, Follen!*—not in vain
Hath thy fine spirit meekly borne
The burthen of Life's cross of pain."

And in "Snow-Bound" he thus invokes a sister of his youth:—

"And yet, dear heart, remembering thee,
Am I not richer than of old?
Safe in thy immortality,
What change can reach the wealth I hold?"

An abiding mood.

Whittier's religious mood is far from being superficial and temporary. It is the life of his genius, out of which flow his ideas of earthly and heavenly content. In outward observance he is loyal to the simple ways of his own sect, and still a frequenter of the Meeting, where—

"from the silence multiplied
By these still forms on either side,
The world that time and sense have known
Falls off and leaves us God alone."

God should be most, he says,—

"where man is least;
So, where is neither church nor priest,
And never rag of form or creed
To clothe the nakedness of need,—
Where farmer-folk in silence meet,—
I turn my bell-unsummoned feet."

He clings in this wise to the formal formlessness of the Quakers, as he would cling, doubtless, to the usages of any church in which he had been bred, provided that its creed rested upon the cardinal doctrines of the Master. Channing seemed to him a hero and

saint, with whom he could enter into full communion: —

“No bars of sect or clime were felt, —
The Babel strife of tongues had ceased, —
And at one common altar knelt
The Quaker and the priest.”

With this liberal inclusion of all true worshippers, he is so much the more impatient of clerical bigotry. “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” has been often on his lips, — sometimes the outbreak of downright wrath, —

*Scorn of
bigotry.*

“Woe to the priesthood! woe
To those whose hire is with the price of blood, —
Perverting, darkening, changing, as they go,
The searching truths of God!”

at other times varied with grim and humorous contempt, as in “The Pastoral Letter” and “The Haschish”; and never more effectively than in the vivid and stinging ballad of the fugitive slave-girl, captured in the house of God, in spite of tearful and defying women’s eyes, and of the stout hands that rise between “the hunter and the flying.” Down comes the parson, bowing low: —

“Of course I know your right divine
To own and work and whip her;
Quick, deacon, throw that Polyglot
Before the wench, and trip her!”

The basic justification of Whittier’s religious trust appears to be the “inward light” vouchsafed to a nature in which the prophet and the poet are one. This solvent of doubt removes him alike from the sadness of Clough and Arnold and the paganism of certain other poets. In the striking “Questions of Life,” a piece which indicates his highest intellectual mark and is in affinity with some of Emerson’s dis-

*The “in-
ward
light.”*

course, he fairly confronts his own share of our modern doubts ; questioning earth, air, and heaven ; perplexed with the mystery of our alliance to the upper and lower worlds ; asking what is this

“centred self, which feels and is ;
A cry between the silences.”

He finds no resource but to turn from

“book and speech of men apart
To the still witness in my heart.”

His repose must come from the direction in which the Concord transcendentalists also have sought for it, the soul's temple irradiated by the presence of the inward light. I have seen a fervent expression of this belief, in a voluntary letter of Whittier's, to a poet who had written an ode concerning intuition as the refuge of the baffled investigator. In fine, the element of faith gives a tone to the whole range of his verse, both religious and secular, and more distinctively than to the work of any other living poet of equal reputation. What he has achieved, then, is greatly due to a force which is the one thing needful in modern life and art. Faith, of some kind, in things as they are or will be, has elevated all great works of human creation. The want of it is felt in that insincere treatment which weakens the builder's, the painter's, and the poet's appeal ; since faith leads to rapture and that to exaltation, — the *passio vera*, without which art gains no hold upon the senses and the souls of men.

Faith, essential to the highest art.

American poets, as personages.

V.

THE leaders of our recent poetic movement, with the exception of Longfellow, — who, like Tennyson

COMPARED TO MRS. BROWNING.

and Browning, devoted himself wholly to ideal work, — seem to have figured more distinctively as personages, in both their lives and writings, than their English contemporaries. This remark certainly applies to Poe, Emerson, Whitman, Holmes, and Lowell, and to none more clearly than to the subject of this review. His traits, moreover, have begotten a sentiment of public affection, which, from its constant manifestation, is not to be overlooked in any judgment of his career. In recognition of a beautiful character, critics have not found it needful to measure this native bard with tape and calipers. His service and the spirit of it offset the blemishes which it is their wont to condemn in poets whose exploits are merely technical. A life is on his written page ; these are the chants of a soldier, and anon the hymnal of a saint. Contemporary honor is not the final test, but it has its proper bearing, — as in the case of Mrs. Browning, whom I have called the most beloved of English poets. Whittier's audience has been won by unaffected pictures of the scenes to which he was bred, by the purity of his nature, and even more by the *earnestness* audible in his songs, injurious as it sometimes is to their artistic purpose. Like the English sibyl, he has obeyed the heavenly vision, and the verse of poets who still trust their inspiration has its material, as well as spiritual, ebb and flow.

It must be owned that Goethe's calm distinction between the poetry of humanity and that of a high ideal is fully illustrated in Whittier's reform-verse. Yet even his failings have "leaned to virtue's side." Those who gained strength from his music to endure defeat and obloquy cherish him with a devotion beyond measure. For his righteous and tender heart they would draw him with their own hands, over path-

strewed with lilies, to a shrine of peace and remembrance. They comprehend his purpose — that he has “tried to make the world a little better, . . . to awaken a love of freedom, justice, and good will,” and to have his name, like Ben Adhem’s, enrolled as of “one that loved his fellow-men.” In their opinion a grace is added to his poetry by the avowal, “I set a higher value on my name as appended to the Anti-Slavery Declaration of 1833, than on the title-page of my book.”

*Pro aris et
focus.*

Our eldest living poet, then, is canonized already by his people as one who left to silence his personal experience, yet entered thoroughly into their joy and sorrow; who has been, like a celibate priest, the consolator of the hearts of others and the keeper of his own; who has best known the work and feeling of the humble household, and whose legend manifestly is *pro aris et focus*. He has stood for New England, also, in his maintenance of her ancient protest against tyranny. He is the veteran of an epoch that can never recur; that scarcely can be equalled, however significant future periods may seem from the artist’s point of view. The primitive life, the old struggle for liberty, are idealized in his strains. Much of both his strength and incompleteness is due to his Hebraic nature; for he is the incarnation of Biblical heroism, of the moral energy that breathed alike, through a cycle of change from dogma to reason, in Hooker, Edwards, Parker, Garrison, and Emerson. In his outbursts against oppression and his cries unto the Lord, we recognize the prophetic fervor, still nearer its height in some of his personal poems, which popular instinct long ago attributed to him. Not only of Ezekiel, but also of himself, he chanted in that early time of anointment and consecration: —

*Hebraic
fervor.*

"The burden of a prophet's power
Fell on me in that fearful hour ;
From off unutterable woes
The curtain of the future rose ;
I saw far down the coming time
The fiery chastisement of crime ;
With noise of mingling hosts, and jar
Of falling towers and shouts of war,
I saw the nations rise and fall,
Like fire-gleams on my tent's white wall."

Oliver Johnson's tribute, a complement to Parkman's, paid honor to "The Prophet Bard of America, poet of freedom, humanity, and religion ; whose words of holy fire aroused the conscience of a guilty nation, and melted the fetters of the slaves." This eulogy from a comrade is the sentiment of a multitude in whose eyes their bard seems almost transfigured by the very words that might be soonest forgotten if precious for their poetry alone. I confess to my own share of this feeling. It may be that he has thought too little of the canons which it is our aim to discover and illustrate ; yet it was to him above all that the present writer felt moved to dedicate a volume with the inscription "Ad Vatem," and to invoke for Whittier

*The
Prophet
Bard.*

*"Ad Va-
tem."*

"the Land that loves thee, her whose child
Thou art, — and whose uplifted hands thou long
Hast stayed with song availing like a prayer."

For surely no aged servant, his eyes having seen in good time the Lord's salvation, ever was more endowed with the love and reverence of a chosen people. They see him resting in the country of Beulah, and there solacing himself for a season. From this comfortable land, where the air is sweet and pleasant (and he is of those who here have "met abundance of what they had sought for in all their pilgrimage"),

they are not yet willing to have him seek the Golden
City of his visions, but would fain adjure him, —

“And stay thou with us long ! vouchsafe us long
This brave autumnal presence, ere the hues
Slow-fading, ere the quaver of thy voice,
The twilight of thine eye, move men to ask
Where hides the chariot,—in what sunset vale,
Beyond thy chosen river, champ the steeds
That wait to bear thee skyward.”



A combination.

from the ideal to the concrete. As a poet, Emerson found himself in a state, not of distraction, but often of indecision, *between the methods of philosophy and art*. To bear this in mind is to account more readily for the peculiar beauties and deficiencies of his verse,—and thus to accept it as it is, and not without some understanding of its value.

Hermann Grimm recurs to the dispute whether our sage was a poet, a philosopher, or a prophet. The fact is that he was born with certain notes of song; he had the poet's eye and ear, and was a poet just so far as, being a philosopher, he accepted poetry as the expression of thought in its rare and prophetic moods, and just so far as, in exquisite moments, he had the mastery of this form of expression.

Ideal prose and verse.

Emerson's prose is full of poetry, and his poems are light and air. But this statement, like so many of his own, gives only one side of a truth. His prose is just as full of every-day sense and wisdom; and something different from prose, however sublunary and imaginative, is needed to constitute a poem. His verse, often diamond-like in contrast with the feldspar of others, at times is ill-cut and beclouded. His prose, then, is that of a wise man, plus a poet; and his verse, by turns, light and twilight, air and vapor. Yet we never feel, as in reading Wordsworth, that certain of his measures are wholly prosaic. He was so careless of ordinary standards, that few of his own craft have held his verse at its worth. It is said that his influence was chiefly, like that of Socrates, upon the sensitive and young, and such is the case with all fresh influences; but I take it that those who have fairly assimilated Emerson's poetry in their youth have been not so much born poets as born thinkers of a poetic cast. It is inevitable, and partakes of

His natural disciples.

growth by exercise, that poets in youth should value a master's sound and color and form, rather than his priceless thought. They are drawn to the latter by the former, or not at all. Yet when poets, even in this day of refinement, have served their technical apprenticeship, the depth and frequent splendor of Emerson's verse grow upon them. They half suspect that he had the finest touch of all when he chose to apply it. It becomes a question whether his discords are those of an undeveloped artist, or the sudden craft of one who knows all art and can afford to be on easy terms with it. I think there is evidence on both sides;—that he had seasons when feeling and expression were in circuit, and others when the wires were down, and that he was as apt to attempt to send a message at one time as at the other. But he suggested the subtilty and swiftness of the soul's reach, even when he failed to sustain it.

*At times
the finest
touch of
all.*

I have said that of two poets, otherwise equal, the one who acquires the broadest knowledge will draw ahead of him who only studies his art, and the poet who thinks most broadly and deeply will draw ahead of all. There can be little doubt of Emerson as a thinker, or as a poet for thinkers satisfied with a deep but abstract and not too varied range. Yet he did not use his breadth of culture and thought to diversify the purpose, form, symbolism, of his poems. They are mostly in one key. They teach but one lesson; that, to be sure, is the first and greatest of all, but they fail to present it, after Nature's method, in many forms of living and beautiful interest, — to exemplify it in action, and thus bring it within universal sympathy. That this should be so was, I say, inevitable from the field of Emerson's research, — that of pure rather than of applied philosophy. Thus

*A single
thought
conveyed,
but that the
greatest.*

far, however, he represents Thought in any adjustment of our poetic group, and furthermore, — his thought being independent and emancipatory, — the American conflict with superstition, with servility to inherited usage and opinion.

*Essential-
ly a poet.*

We shall see that he had himself a noble and comprehensive ideal of what a typical poet should be, and was aware that his own song fell short of it. Still, he called himself a poet, and the consent of the best minds has sustained him in his judgment. His prose alone, as Lowell said, showed that he was essentially a poet; another with reason declared of his spoken essays that they were "not so much lectures as grave didactic poems, theogonies," adorned with "odes" and "eclogues." Thirty years later a cool and subtle writer looks back to find them the "most poetical, the most beautiful, productions of the American mind." For once the arbiters agree, except in a question akin to the dispute whether all things consist solely of spirit or solely of matter. Common opinion justified Mr. Sanborn's fine paradox that, instead of its being settled that Emerson could not write poetry, it was settled that he could write nothing else. We know his distaste for convention, his mistrust of "tinkle" and "efficacious rhymes." But his gift lifted him above his will; even while throwing out his grapnel, clinging to prose as the firm ground of his work, he rose involuntarily and with music. And it well may be that at times he wrote verse as an avowal of his nativity, and like a noble privileged to use the language of the court. Certainly he did not restrict himself to the poet's calling with the loyalty of Tennyson and Longfellow. In verse, however careful of his phrase, he was something of a rhapsodist, not apt to gloss his revelations

*An apt
paradox.*

and exhortings with the nice perfection of those others. He must be reviewed as one whose verse and parable and prophecy alike were means to an end, — that end not art, but the enfranchisement and stimulation of his people and his time. When Longfellow, the poet of graceful art and of sympathy as tender as his voice, took his departure, there went up a cry as from a sense of fireside loss. People everywhere dwelt upon the story of his life and recalled his folk-songs. Emerson glided away almost unperceived under the shadow of the popular bereavement. But soon, and still multiplying from the highest sources, tributes to his genius began to appear, — searching, studying, expounding him, — as when a grand nature, an originating force, has ceased to labor for us. This is the best of fame: to impress the selected minds, which redistribute the effect in steadfast circles of extension. More than his associates, Emerson achieved this fame. He had the great man's intellect, which, according to Landor, "puts in motion the intellect of others." He was, besides, so rare a personage, that one who seeks to examine his writings apart from the facts and conduct of his life needs must wander off in contemplation of the man himself. Yet anything that others can write of him is poor indeed beside a collect of his own golden sayings. He felt his work to be its own and best interpreter, and of recent authors who have justly held this feeling he doubtless was the chief.

*His office.**Order of intellect.*

II.

His writings, then, are the key to his biography — the scroll of a life which, as for essential matter, and as he said of Plato's, was chiefly "interior." To quote his own language further, "Great geniuses have

*R. W. E.:
born in
Boston,
Mass.,
May 25,
1803.*

*Ancestry.**Training.**Influence
of Chan-
ning.**Retire-
ment from
the pulpit.*

the shortest biographies." Among the external points of significance in Emerson's story are those derived from his ancestral strain, for he was of pure and even gentle English blood, "through eight generations of cultured, conscientious, and practical ministers." He himself, as we know, assumed the profession of his father and forefathers, and for a time was a Unitarian preacher in Boston; this, after the stated courses at Harvard, where he read and wrote philosophy, nor failed to cultivate the Muse — for whose art he had shown a rare aptness even in childhood. The office and honors of the Class Poet fell to him, as to Lowell in after years. In letters he had Everett, Ticknor, and Edward Channing for instructors. In theology he was deeply influenced by Channing, the divine, — the true founder, through the work of Emerson and lesser pupils, of our liberal religious structure. Emerson projected the lines of the master so far beyond their first draft that he was unable long to remain within the Unitarian limits of that day. Some one has cleverly said that his verse, "Good-bye, proud world!" came from one whose future gave no cause for epigrams like that of Madame de Sévigné on Cardinal de Retz — of whom she wrote that he pretended to retire from a world which he saw was retiring from him. The separation from the church, and the retreat to Concord, were the beginning of Emerson's long career as poet, lecturer, essayist, thinker and inspirer. The details of his social, domestic, and civic relations are all upon record. Nothing could be more seemly than his life-long abode in the New England village of Concord, the home of his line, the birth-place of our liberties;

source of our most resultful thought. Here he blended, in his speech and action, the culture of the university, nigh at hand, with the shrewd prudence of the local neighborhood, as became a poet and sage imbued with patriotism, morals, and the wisdom of practical life. Here, though crossing the ocean more than once, and inspecting other lands with the regard that sees for once and all, he otherwise exemplified during half a century his own conception of the clear spirit — that needs not to go afar upon its quests, because it vibrates boundlessly, and includes all things within reach and ken. For the rest, the life of Emerson appertained to the household, the library, the walk, the talk with all sorts and conditions of men, communion with rare natures, the proper part in local and national movement. As a lecturer, his range was the country at large, but the group that drew about him made Concord a modern Academe. Unconsciously he idealized them all with the halo of his own attributes. To him they all were of the breed so exquisitely characterized in his reference to Margaret Fuller's "Friends." "I remember," he says, "these persons as a fair, commanding troop, every one of them adorned by some splendor of beauty, of grace, of talent, or of character, and comprising in their band persons who have since disclosed sterling worth and elevated aims in the conduct of life." Thus year after year a tide, that ceases not with the death of him who mainly attracted it, has set toward Concord, — a movement of pilgrims craving spiritual exaltation and the interplay of mind with mind. The poet's moral and intellectual experiences are revealed in discourses, always beginning with the memorable sermon on the Lord's Supper, which pre-

*After-life
and
career.*

*Pupils and
associates.*

Concord.

*Sermon on
the Com-
munion,
1832.*

*Essay on
"Nature,"
1836.*

*The tran-
scendental
movement.*

*His per-
sonal traits
and bear-
ing.*

figured his emancipation from dogma,¹ and the essay on Nature, wherein he applied a new vision to the world about us. These were the Alpha of his conviction and insight; his after-speech followed consistently and surely, "as the night the day." He created his own audience, whose demand for his thought grew by what it fed on, beginning in a section, and spreading not only through a country but over many lands. If it is true that "he was not the prince of transcendentalists but the prince of idealists," the history of New England transcendentalism is no less a corollary to the problem of Emerson's life.

Our starry memories of the places and people that once knew Emerson radiate always from one centre — the presence of the sage himself. Many pupils, catching something of his own sure and precise art of delineation, have drawn his image for us, dwelling upon the sinewy bending figure, the shining and expectant face, the union of masculinity and sweetness in his bearing. His "full body tone" is recalled, "full and sweet rather than sonorous, yet flexible, and haunted by many modulations." Persuasion sat upon his lips. The epithet "sun-accustomed" is applied to Emerson's piercing eyes by one, a woman and a poet, who marked the aquiline effect of his noble profile. I, too, remember him in this wise, and as the most serene of men: one whose repose, whose tranquillity, was not the contentment of an idler housed in worldly comforts, but the token of spiritual adjustment to all the correspondences of life; as the bravest and most deferential, the proud-

¹ Definitely set forth in his Address before the Senior Class

HIS PHILOSOPHY.

est in self-respect, yet recognizing in deep the supremacy of universal law. No man
tive, and none with so plain and absolute
vation of his own ground. Even in the sh
silence of his closing years, he bore the mie
assured that

“the gods reclaim not from the seer
Their gift, although he ceases here to sing,
And, like the antique sage, a covering
Draws round his head, knowing what change i

III.

It is not my province to take part in the
sion of Emerson's philosophy, his system o
system. Some notion of this, however, mu
our thoughts of him as a poet, since of all
he most nearly fulfilled Wordsworth's insp
diction, uttered sixty years ago, of the app
union of the poet and the philosopher. He
the higher office that of the poet, — of him w
the brook that flows fast by the oracles, — y
less thought himself not so well endowed witi
and passion that his teaching should be sul
to his song. But the latter was always the
ing of his philosophic thought, and it is ess
keep in view the basis of that pure reflecti
looked upon Nature as pregnant with Soul;
the Spirit always moved upon the face of th
The incomprehensible plan was perfect: wha
is right. Thus far he knew, and was an optir
reverent intent. It was in vain to ask him
what he did not know, to avow a creed foun
his hopes. If a theist, with his intuition of

*Reverence
without
dogma.*

that life, and the sense of omnipresence was so clearly the dominant sense of its attributes, that to call him a theist rather than a pantheist is simply a dispute about terms; to pronounce him a Christian theist is to go beyond his own testimony. Such a writer must be judged by the concurrence of his books; they are his record, and the parole evidence of no associate can weigh against his written manifest for an instant. His writings assure us that he accepted all bibles and creeds for what good there was in them. One thing for him was "certain": "Religions are obsolete when lives do not proceed from them." He saw that "unlovely, nay frightful, is the solitude of the soul which is without God in the world"; but the creeds and dogmas of anthropomorphic theology were merely germinal. "Man," thus far, has "made all religions, and will yet make new and even higher faiths."

*An idealist
and eclec-
tic.*

Emerson, a man of our time, while a transcendentalist, looking inward rather than to books for his wisdom, studied well the past, and earlier sages were the faculty of his school. A latter-day eclectic, he took from all literatures their best and essential. A Platonic idealist, he was not averse to the inductive method of Aristotle; he had the Alexandrian faith and ecstasy, the Epicurean zest and faculty of selection; like the Stoics, he observed morals, heroism, self-denial, and frugality. There is much in his teachings that recalls the beautiful ethics of Marcus Aurelius, and the words of Epictetus, as reported by Arrian. His spiritual leanings never stinted his regard of men and manners. He kept a sure eye on the world; he was not only a philosopher, but the paragon of gentlemen, with something more than the Oriental, the Grecian, or the Gallic, tact. He relished

Morals.

*Life taken
at its full
worth.*

to the full the brave distinctions, the portraitures and tests of Plutarch, and found the best of all good company in the worldly wise, the cheery and comfortable Montaigne. One may almost say that he refined and digested what was good in all philosophies, and nothing more. He would get hold of Swedenborg, the mystic, yet not be Swedenborg exclusively, nor imitate the rhetoric of the Sophists, the pride of the Cynics. From all he learned what each confesses in the end, — the limitations of inquiry, — that the Finite cannot measure, though it may feel, the Infinite. No more would he formulate a philosophy, but within it he could recognize nature, art, taste, morals, laws, religion, and the chance of immortality. When it was said that he had no new system, he thought that he needed none, and was sceptical of classification.

His wisdom unformulated.

It appears that he found the key to his own nature in Plato, being an idealist first of all. His intuitive faculty was so determined that ideality and mysticism gave him the surest promise of realities; his own intellect satisfied him of the power of intellect. Plainly hearing an interior voice, he had no doubt that other men were similarly monished. Plato, the guide of his youth, remained his type of philosopher and man. To Plato's works alone should Omar's saying of the Koran be applied: "Burn the libraries, for their value is in this book." Nowhere else was there such a range of speculation. "Out of Plato come all things." And thus he held to the last. "Of Plato," he said, years afterward, "I hesitate to speak, lest there should be no end. . . . Why should not young men be educated on this book? It would suffice for the tuition of the race." Yet Emerson's philosophy was a greater advance from Neo-Platonism than the Alexandrians were able to make upon the

Plato his early guide and type.

*Special
likeness of
Emerson
to Ploti-
nus.*

lines indicated by their elemental master. In personal life and bearing, Plotinus, with whom our poet seems to have been most in sympathy, was very closely his prototype. There is first to be noted the curious resemblance between the eclectic, investigating Alexandrian age and our present time; and secondly, it is Plotinus of whom we are told that "He lived at the same time with himself and with others, and the inward activity of his spirit ceased only during his hours of sleep. . . . His written style was close, pregnant, and richer in thought than in words, yet enthusiastic, and always pointing to the main object. He was more eloquent in his oral communications, and was said to be very clever in finding the appropriate word, even if he failed in accuracy on the whole. Besides this, the beauty of his person was increased when discoursing; his countenance was lighted up with genius." Taylor's translations of selections from the Works of Plotinus, published in 1817 and 1834, must have fallen into Emerson's hands, and I am satisfied of their impression upon his mind. As one examines the lives and writings of the two men, the likeness is still more notable, especially with respect to their views of fate, will, ethics, the "higher law," the analysis of the beautiful, and in the ardor with which young students, and many of the elderly and wise, listened to their respective teachings. Emerson was a Plotinus reanimate after the lapse of sixteen centuries of Christianity. He has now, like the Neo-Platonist, "led back the Divine principle within" him "to the God who is all in all."

*Standards
of great-
ness.*

To the great thinkers of the past, the New England teacher, without fear or boasting, well might feel himself allied. The accepted great, free of the ordinary bounds of place and time, recognize one another

across the vague, like stars of the prime magnitude in the open night. Emerson knew the haps and signs of genius: "Whenever we find a man higher by a whole head than any of his contemporaries, it is sure to come in doubt what are his real works." We cannot say "What is master, and what school." "As for their borrowings and adaptings, they know how to borrow. . . . A great man is one of the affinities, who takes of everything." But they are not above the law of perfect life; virtue, simplicity, absolute sincerity, these are their photosphere. "Live as on a mountain. Let men see, let them know, a real man, who lives as he was meant to live." To this Roman standard the New Englander subjoined the shrewd, kindly wisdom of his stock and region. He was eminent among those whose common sense is the most telling point to be made against Locke's negation of innate ideas, — whose judgment is so apt that, granting Locke's theory, it can be accounted for only by the modern theory of ideas prenatal and inherited. His written wisdom is more effective than Montaigne's, being less dependent on citations. He knew by instinct what our novelists learn from observation and experience; or is it that they study chiefly their own time and neighborhood, while he sat aloof and with the ages? Thus strong in equipment, sound in heart, and lofty of intellect, we find him revered by his pupils, and without a living peer in the faculty of elevating the purpose of those who listened to his buoyant words. We must confess that a differentiation between master and school, and between members of the school, after awhile became manifest. That such a process was inevitable is plain, when Emerson's transcendental and self-reliant laws of conduct are kept in mind.

*Innate
wisdom.*

Transcendental and inductive methods contrasted.

One may say, in illustration, that his philosophical method bears to the inductive or empirical a relation similar to that between the poetry of self-expression and the poetry of æsthetic creation, — a relation of the subjective to the objective. The former kind of verse often is the more spontaneous, since it has its birth in the human need for utterance. It is the cry of adolescence and femininity, the resource of sensitive natures in which emotion outvies the sense of external beauty or power. It was the voice of Shakespeare's youth, nor was it ever quieted throughout the restless careers of Byron, Heine, and De Musset. But we accept as the great works of the poets their intellectual and objective creations, wherein the artist has gone beyond his own joy and pain, his narrow intro-vision, to observe, combine, transfigure, the outer world of nature and life. Such the epics, idyls, dramas, of the masters. When subjective poetry is the yield of a lofty nature, or of an ideal and rapturous womanhood like Mrs. Browning's, it is a boon and revelation to us all ; but when, as too often, it is the spring-rise of a purling, commonplace streamlet, its egotism grows pitiful and repulsive. This lesson has been learned, and now our minor poets, in their fear of it, strive to give pleasure to our sense of the beautiful, and work as artists, — though somewhat too delicately, — rather than to pose as exceptional beings, "among men, but not of them."

The master and his pupils.

As with the subjective poets, so with many of the transcendental acolytes. The force of Emerson lay in the depth and clearness of his intentions. He gave us the revelation and prophecy of a man among millions. Such a teacher aids the self-development of noble minds ; his chief peril is that of nurturing a weaker class that cannot follow where he leads.

Some of its enthusiasts will scarcely fail to set too high a value upon their personal impulses. They "still revere," but forget to "still suspect" themselves "in lowliness of heart." For the rest, the down-East instinct is advisory and homiletic; New Englanders are prone to teach, and slower to be taught. Emerson, however, grew to be their superior man, the one to whom all agreed to listen, and from whom all quote. His example, also, has somewhat advanced the art of listening, in which he was so perfect, with forward head and bright, expectant visage. His inculcations were of freedom, of the self-guidance that learns to unlearn and bears away from tradition; yet this, too, will breed false liberty of conceit in minor votaries, whose inward light may do well enough for themselves, yet not suffice for the light of the world. Hence the public, accepting Emerson, has been less tolerant of more than one Emersonian, with his *ego, et rex meus*. After all is said, we must see that our transcendentalists were a zealous, aspiring band of seekers after the true, the beautiful, and the good; what they have lacked in deference they have made up in earnestness and spirituality. There have been receptive natures among them, upon whom, as indeed upon the genius of his people far and wide, the tonic effect of Emerson's life and precept has been immeasurable. Goethe's declaration of himself that he had been "to the Germans in general, and to the young German poets in particular, their liberator," may, with perfect truth, be applied to Emerson, and to a generation that has thriven on his word. He has taught his countrymen the worth of virtue, wisdom, courage, — above all, to fashion life upon a self-reliant pattern, obeying the dictates of their own souls.

*Diverse
results of
his influ-
ence.*

*A libera-
tor.*

IV.

*Emerson,
the Poet.*

"*Poems*,"
1847.

"*May-
Day, and
Other
Pieces*,"
1867.

"*Poems*,"
1876.

*Philosophy
transfig-
ured.*

*His view
of Art.*

RECOGNIZING Emerson's high mood as that of a most original poet, I wish chiefly to consider his relations to poetry and the poetic art. His imaginative essays are not poems. Speech is not song; the rarest mosaic lacks the soul of the canvas swept by the brush. The credentials that he presented from time to time, and mostly in that dawn when poets sing if ever, are few and fragmentary, but they will suffice. They are the trophies, the wreaths and golden vessels, the *spolia opima*, which he set before the shrine of the goddess. They are the avowal of a rare spirit that there are things which cannot be rendered in prose; that Poetry claims a finer art, a supremest utterance, for her service, and that she alone can stamp the coins and bronzes which carry to the future the likeness of her viceroy.

In his verse, Emerson's spiritual philosophy and laws of conduct appear again, but transfigured. Always the idea of Soul, central and pervading, of which Nature's forms are but the created symbols. As in his early discourse he recognized two entities, Nature and the Soul, so to the last he believed Art to be simply the union of Nature with man's will—Thought symbolizing itself through Nature's aid. Thought, sheer ideality, was his sovereign; he was utterly trustful of its guidance. The law of poetic beauty depends on the beauty of the thought, which, perforce, assumes the fittest, and therefore most charming, mode of expression. The key to art is the eternal fitness of things; this is the sure test and solvent. Over and again he asserted his conviction: "Great thoughts insure musical expression. Every

tion wakened brings its own language, and that is always musical. . . . Whatever language the poet uses, the secret of tone is at the heart of the poem." He cites Möller, who taught that the building which was fitted accurately to answer its end would turn out to be beautiful, though beauty had not been intended. (The enforced beauty of even the rudest sailing craft always has seemed to me the most striking illustration of this truth.) In fine, Emerson sees all forms of art symbolizing but one Reason, not one mind, but The Mind that made the world. He refers "all production at last to an aboriginal Power." It is easy to discern that from the first he recognized "the motion and the spirit," which to Wordsworth were revealed only by the discipline of years; but his song went beyond the range of landscape and peasant, touching upon the verities of life and thought. "Brahma" is the presentation of the truth manifest to the oldest and most eastern East, and beyond which the West can never go. How strange that these quatrains could have seemed strange! They reveal the light of Asia, but no less the thought of Plato—who said that in all nations certain minds dwell on the "fundamental Unity," and "lose all being in one Being." Everywhere one stuff, under all forms, this the woven symbolism of the universal Soul, the only reality, the single and subdivided Identity that alone can "keep and pass and turn again," that is at once the doubter and the doubt, the slayer and the slain, light and shadow, the hither and the yon. Love is but the affinity of its portions, the desire for reunion, the knowledge of soul by soul, to which the eyes of lovers are but windows. Art is the handiwork of the soul, with materials created by it-

*All art a
reflex of
the univer-
sal soul.*

*"Brah-
ma."*

*Our lyric
poet.*

*Margaret
Fuller's
comment.*

*Why Di-
dacticism
repels us.*

Thus far the theory of Emerson's song. It does not follow that he composed upon a theory. At times I think him the first of our lyric poets, his turns are so wild and unexpected; and he was never commonplace, even when writing for occasions. His verse changes unawares from a certain tension and angularity that were congenital, to an ethereal, unhampered freedom, the poetic soul in full glow, the inner music loosed and set at large. Margaret Fuller wrote that his poems were "mostly philosophical, which is not the truest kind of poetry." But this depends upon the measure of its didacticism. Emerson made philosophical poetry imaginative, elevating, and thus gave new evidence that the poet's realm is unbounded. If he sought first principles, he looked within himself for them, and thus portrays himself, not only the penetrative thinker, but the living man, the citizen, the New England villager, whose symbols are drawn from the actual woods and hills of a neighborhood. Certainly he went to rural nature for his vigor, his imagery and adornments. An impassioned sense of its beauty made him the reverse of the traditional descriptive poet. Most poetry of nature justly is termed didactic; most philosophical verse the same. Miss Fuller failed to make distinctions. All feel what didacticism signifies, but let us try to formulate it.

Didacticism is the gospel of half-truths. Its senses are torpid; it fails to catch and convey the soul of truth, which is beauty. Truth shorn of its beauty is tedious and not poetical. We weary of didactic verse, therefore, not because of its truth, but because of its self-delusive falsehood. It flourishes with a dull and prosaic generation. The true poet, as Mrs. Browning saw, is your only truth-teller, because he gives the truth complete in beauty or not at all.

Emerson doubts his power to capture the very truth of nature. Its essence — its beauty — is so elusive ; it flees and leaves but a corpse behind ; it is the pearly glint of the shells among the bubbles of the latest wave : —

*Elusive
nature.*

"I fetched my sea-born treasures home ;
But the poor, unsightly, noisome things
Had left their beauty on the shore,
With the sun, and the sand, and the wild uproar."

But such poems as the "Forerunners" show how closely he moved, after all, upon the trail of the evading sprite. He seemed, by the first intention, and with an exact precision of grace and aptness, to put in phrases what he saw and felt, — and he saw and felt so much more than others ! He had the aboriginal eye, and the civilized sensibility ; he caught both the external and the scientific truth of natural things, and their poetic charm withal. As he triumphed over the untruthfulness of the mere verse-maker, and the dulness of the moralist, his instant, sure, yet airy transcripts gave his poems of nature a quality with out a counterpart. Some of his measures had at least the flutter of the twig whence the bird has just flown. He did not quite fail of that music music-born,

*Emerson
close upon
her trail.*

— "a melody born of melody,
Which melts the world into a sea.
Toil could never compass it ;
Art its height could never hit."

He infused his meditations with the sheen of Day itself, — of

*"Wood-
notes."*

— "one of the charmed days
When the genius of God doth flow ;
The wind may alter twenty ways,
A tempest cannot blow ;
It may blow north, it still is warm ;
Or south, it still is clear ;

Or east, it smells like a clover-farm ;
Or west, no thunder fear."

He returns with delight to Nature's blending of her laws of beauty and use, perceiving that she

— "beats in perfect tune,
And rounds with rhyme her every rune,
Whether she work in land or sea,
Or hide underground her alchemy.
Thou canst not wave thy staff in air,
Or dip thy paddle in the lake,
But it carves the bow of beauty there,
And the ripples in rhymes the oar forsake."

"The
Problem."

"May-
Day."

Always
the one apt
word.

Artless-
ness.

"Woodnotes" is full of lyrical ecstasy and light-some turns and graces. To assimilate such a poem of nature, or "The Problem," that masterpiece of religion and art, is to feed on holy dew, and to comprehend how the neophytes who were bred upon it find the manna of noontide somewhat rank and innutritious. "May-Day" is less lyrical, more plainly descriptive of the growth and meaning of the Spring, but not in any part didactic. It is the record of the poet's training, a match to Wordsworth's portrayal of his subjective communing with Nature in youth ; its spirit is the same with Lowell's woodland joyousness, one of child-like and unquestioning zest. Finally, this poet's scenic joinery is so true, so mortised with the one apt word, as where he says that the wings of Time are "*pied* with morning and with night," and the one best word or phrase is so unlooked for, that, as I say, we scarcely know whether all this comes by grace of instinct, or with search and artistic forethought. It seems "the first fine careless rapture"; the labor, which results in the truth of Tennyson's landscape and the pathos of Longfellow's, may be there, but is not to be detected, and in these touches, if not otherwise, he excelled his compeers. His generalizations

pertain to the unseen world ; viewing the actual, he puts its strength and fineness alike into a line or epithet. He was born with an unrivalled faculty of selection. Monadnock is the "constant giver," the Titan that "heeds his sky-affairs"; the tiny humming-bee a "voyager of light and noon," a "yellow-breeched philosopher," and again an "animated torrid zone"; the defiant titmouse, an "atom in full breath." For a snow-storm, or the ocean, he uses his broader brush, but once only and well. His minute truth and sense of values are held in honor by his pupils Whitman and Burroughs, our poetic familiars of the field, and by all to whom the seasonable marvels of the pastoral year are not unwelcome or unknown.

His epithets.

Thus keenly Emerson's instinct responded to the beauty of Nature. I have hinted that her secure laws were the chief promoters of his imagination. It coursed along her hidden ways. In this he antedated Tennyson, and was less didactic than Goethe and kindred predecessors. His foresight gave spurs to the intellect of Tyndall and other investigators, — to their ideal faculty, without which no explorer moves from post to outpost of discovery. Correlatively, each wonder-breeding point attained by the experimentalists was also occupied by our eager and learned thinker from the moment of its certainty. Each certainty gave him joy ; reasoning *a priori* from his sense of a spiritual Force, the seer anticipated the truths demonstrated by the inductive workers, and expected the demonstration. Even in "The Sphinx," the first poem of his first collection, the conservation of force, the evolution from the primordial atom, are made to subserve his mystical faith in a broad Identity. Here, thirty years before Tennyson made his most compact expression of the central truth, —

Scientific prescience.

Darwin anticipated.

"The Sphinx."

"Flower in the crannied wall . . .
 Little flower—but if I could understand
 What you are, root and all, and all in all,
 I should know what God and man is,"

Emerson had put it in this wise:—

"Thorough a thousand voices
 Spoke the universal dame:
 'Who telleth one of my meanings,
 Is master of all I am.'"

*The user
 of evolu-
 tion.*

The reference, in "Bacchus," to the ascent of life
 from form to form, still remains incomparable for terse-
 ness and poetic illumination:—

—"I, drinking this,
 Shall hear far Chaos talk with me;
 Kings unborn shall walk with me;
 And the poor grass shall plot and plan
 What it will do when it is man."

And in "Woodnotes" he discoursed of

—"the genesis of things,
 Of tendency through endless ages,
 Of star-dust and star-pilgrimages,
 Of rounded worlds, of space and time,
 Of the old flood's subsiding slime";

but always thinks of the universal Soul as the only
 reality,—of creation's process as simply the meta-
 morphosis which

"Melts things that be to things that seem,
 And solid nature to a dream."

Even in the pathetic "Threnody" he stays his an-
 guish with faith in the beneficence of Law. With
 more passion and less method than afterward gave
 form to "In Memoriam," he declared that the "mys-
 teries of Nature's heart" were "past the blasphemies
 of grief." He saw

—"the genius of the whole,
 Ascendant in the primal soul,
 Beckon it when to go and come."

Such a poet was not like to go backward. The "Song of Nature" is his pæan to her verities, still more clearly manifest in his riper years. This superb series of quatrains, cumulative as thunder-heads and fired with lyric glory, will lend its light to whatsoever the poetry of the future has in reserve for us.

"Song of Nature."

It should be noted that Emerson's vision of the sublime in scientific discovery increased his distaste for mere style, and moved him to contentment with the readiest mode of expression. It tempered his eulogy of "Art," and made him draw this contrast: "Nature transcends all moods of thought, and its secret we do not yet find. But a gallery stands at the mercy of our moods, and there is a moment when it becomes frivolous. I do not wonder that Newton, with an attention habitually engaged on the paths of planets and suns, should have wondered what the Earl of Pembroke found to admire in 'stone dolls.'"

Science and Art. Cf. "Victorian Poets": pp. 12-16.

Right here we observe (deferring matters of construction) that our seer's limitations as a poet are indicated by his dependence on out-door nature, and by his failure to utilize those higher symbols of the prime Intelligence which comprise the living, acting, suffering world of man. With a certain pride of reserve, that did not lessen his beautiful deference to individuals, he proclaimed "the advantage which the country life possesses for a powerful mind over the artificial and curtailed life of cities." He justified solitude by saying that great men, from Plato to Wordsworth, did not live in a crowd, but descended into it from time to time as benefactors. Above all he declared—"I am by nature a poet, and therefore must live in the country." But here a Goethe, or De Musset, or Browning might rejoin: "And I am a poet, and need the focal life of the town." If man be the paragon of life on

Emerson's limitations.

Narrowing the poet's franchise.

this globe, his works and passions the rarest symbols of the life unseen, then the profoundest study is mankind. Emerson's theorem was a restriction of the poet's liberties. One can name great poets who would have been greater but for the trammels of their seclusion. I believe that Emerson's came from self-knowledge. He kept his range with incomparable tact and philosophy. Poets of a wider franchise — with Shakespeare at their front — have found that genius gains most from Nature during that formative period when one reads her heart, if ever, and that afterward he may safely leave her, as a child his mother, to return from time to time, but still to do his part among the ranks of men.

Life, action, and passion, wanting in his song.

Emerson makes light of travel for pleasure and observation, but ever more closely would observe the ways of the inanimate world. Yet what are man's works but the works of Nature by one remove? To one poet is given the ear to comprehend the murmur of the forest, to another the sense that times the heartbeats of humanity. Few have had Emerson's inward eye, but it is well that some have not been restricted to it. He clung by attraction, no less than by circumstance, to "a society in which introspection," as Mr. James has shrewdly written, "thanks to the want of other entertainment, played almost the part of a social resource." His verse, in fact, is almost wholly void of the epic and dramatic elements which inform the world's great works of art. Action, characterization, specific sympathy, and passion are wanting in his song. His voice comes "like a falling star" from a skyey dome of pure abstraction. Once or twice, some little picture from life, — a gypsy girl, a scarcely outlined friend or loved one, — but otherwise no personage in his works except, it may be, the poet himself,

the Saadi of his introspective song: even that wise and joyous bard restored in fragments, suggested rather than portrayed. Emerson would be the "best bard, because the wisest," if the wisdom of his song illustrated itself in living types. He knew the human world, none better, and generalized the sum of its attainments, — was gracious, shrewd, and calm, — but could not hold up the mirror and show us to ourselves. He was that unique songster, a poet of fire and vision, quite above the moralist, yet neither to be classed as objective or subjective; he perceived the source of all passion and wisdom, yet rendered neither the hearts of others nor his own. His love poetry is eulogized, but it wants the vital grip wherewith his "Concord Fight" and "Boston Hymn" fasten on our sense of manhood and patriotism. It chants of Love, not of the beloved; its flame is pure and general as moonlight and as high-removed. "All mankind love a lover," and it is not enough to discourse upon the philosophy of "Love," "Experience," "Power," "Friendship." Emerson's "Bacchus" must press for him

Characteristics.

— "wine, but wine which never grew
In the belly of the grape."

His deepest yearnings are expressed in that passionate outburst, — the momentary human wail over his dead child, — and in the human sense of lost companionship when he tells us, —

"In the long sunny afternoon,
The plain was full of ghosts."

Oftener he moves apart; his blood is ichor, not our own; his thoughts are with the firmament. We reverence his vocation, and know ourselves unfitted for it. He touches life more nearly in passages that have the acuteness, the practical wisdom of his prose works and days; but these are not his testimonials as a poet.

*A layer on
of hands.*

His laying on of hands was more potent ; a transmitted heat has gone abroad through the ministry of his disciples, who practise as he preached, and sometimes transcend both his preaching and his practice. All the same, the originator of a force is greater than others who add four-fold to its momentum. They are never so manifestly his pupils as when they are "scarifying" and "sounding and exploring" him, "reporting where they touch bottom and where not," on ground of their own, but with a pleasant mockery of the master's word and wont. There was a semblance between the poets Emerson and Rossetti, first, in the small amount of their lyrical work, and again in the positive influence which each exerted upon his pupils. In quality the Concord seer, and the English poet who was at once the most spiritual and sensuous of his own school, were wholly unlike. Rossetti was touched with white fire, but dreamed of souls that meet and glow when disembodied. The spirits of his beatified thrill with human passion. Our seer brought something of heaven to earth, while Rossetti yearned to carry life through death to heaven.

Rossetti.

*Metrical
style.*

The technical features of Emerson's verse correspond to our idea of its meaning. In fact, his view of personal culture also applied to his metrical style. "Manners are not to be directly cultivated. That is frivolous ; leave it to children. . . . We must look at the mark, not at the arrow, and perhaps the best rule is Lord Bacon's, — that to attain good forms one only needs not to despise them." Delicate and adroit artisans, in whose eyes poetry is solely a piece of design, may find the awkwardness of Emerson's verse a bar to right comprehension of its frequent beauty and universal purpose. I am not sure but one must be of the poet's own country and breeding to look

quite down his vistas and by-paths : for every American has something of Emerson in him, and the secret of the land was in the poet, — the same Americanism that Whitman sees in the farmer, the deck-hand, the snag-toothed hostler, atoning with its humanities for their sins past and present, as for the sins of Harte's gamblers and diggers of the gulch. It may be, too, that other conditions are needed to open the ear to the melody, and to shut out the discords, of Emerson's song. The melody is there, and though the range be narrow, is various within itself. The charm is that of new-world and native wood-notes wild. Not seldom a lyrical phrase is the more taking for its halt, — helped out, like the poet's own speech, by the half-stammer and pause that were wont to precede the rarest or weightiest word of all.

*Native
wood-notes
wild.*

Among the followers of any art there are those whose compositions are effective in the mass, their treatment broad, the beauty pervasive ; again, those who with small constructive feeling are rich in detail, and whose work is interspersed with fine and original touches ; lastly, the complete artists, in whom, however vivid their originality and great their special beauties, the general design is always kept in hand. Emerson never felt the strength of proportion that compels the races to whom art is a religion and a law. He has given many a pang to lovers of the beautiful, who have endured his irreverence by allowing for his supposed disabilities. He satisfied his conscience in the same easy way, declaring that he was from his "very incapacity of mechanical writing" a "chartered libertine." But his speech bewrayeth him. Who sounds one perfect chord can sound again. His greater efforts in verse, as in prose, show that he chose to deprecate the constructive faculty lest it might limit

*Deficient
sense of
proportion.*

A nonconformist.

Miss Fuller on his synthesis.

Unique lyrics and notable sayings.

his ease and freedom. And his instinct of personality, not without a pride of its own, made him a nonconformist. We are told of his mode of preparing an essay, — of the slow-growing medley of thoughts on a topic, at last brought out and strung at random, like a child's variegated beads. But I do not find that his best essays read backward as well as forward ; I suspect an art beneath their loose arrangement, and I see at times the proof of continuous heat. His early critic declared that he had not "written one good work, if such a work be one where the whole commands more attention than the parts." But again we see that she too rarely qualified her oracles. At that time he had written poems of which the whole and the parts were at least justly related masterpieces, — lyrical masterpieces, of course, not epic or dramatic ; of such were the "Threnody" and "Woodnotes," to which was afterward added the "May-Day." Breadth and proportion, in a less degree, mark "The Problem," "Monadnock," "Merlin," and a few other pieces. But working similarly he falls short in the labored dithyrambic, "Initial, Dæmonic, and Celestial Love." He was formal enough in youth, before he struck out for himself, and at the age of eleven, judging from his practice-work, was as precocious as Bryant or Poe. But he soon gave up construction, putting a trademark upon his verse, and trusting that freedom would lead to something new. So many precious sayings enrich his more sustained poems as to make us include him at times with the complete artists. Certainly, both in these and in the unique bits so characteristic that they are the poet himself, — "Terminus," "Character," "Manners," "Nature," etc., — he ranks with the foremost of the second class, poets eminent for special graces, values, sudden meteors of thought. In that

Wrought in a sad sincerity;
Himself from God he could not free;
He builded better than he knew; —
The conscious stone to beauty grew."

"Earth proudly wears the Parthenon
As the best gem upon her zone;
And Morning opes with haste her lids,
To gaze upon the Pyramids."

"One accent of the Holy Ghost
The heedless world hath never lost."

"Or ever the wild Time coined itself
Into calendar months and days."

"Set not thy foot on graves."

"Good-bye, proud world! I'm going home."

"What are they all, in their high conceit,
When man in the bush with God may meet?"

"— If eyes were made for seeing,
Then Beauty is its own excuse for being."

"Leave all thy pedant lore apart,
God hid the whole world in thy heart."

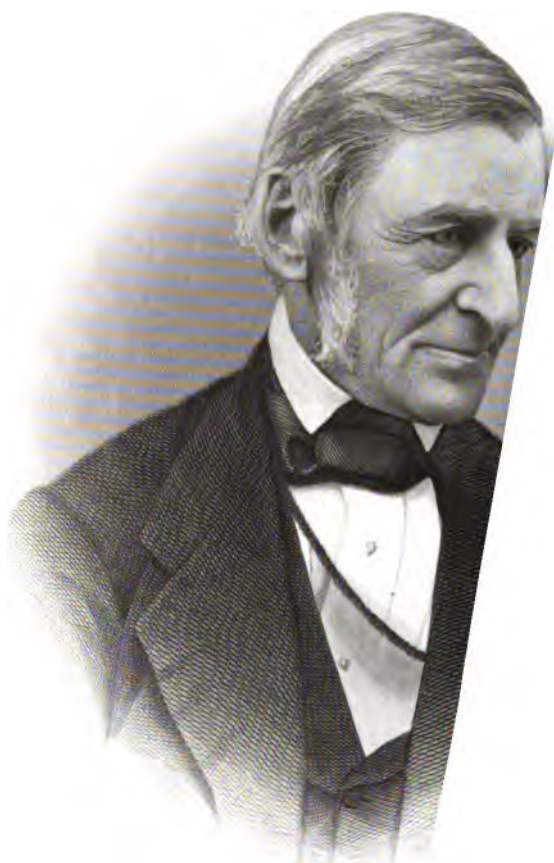
"And conscious Law is King of kings."

"— Mount to paradise
By the stairway of surprise."

"Here once the embattled farmers stood,
And fired the shot heard round the world."

"Great is the art,
Great be the manners, of the bard."

"The silent organ loudest chants
The master's requiem."



R. W. L.

Ver
at rar
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*Unsur-
passed in
lyrical
"quality."*

in foot-beats, such as, — "Hitch your wagon to a star," "Nature is loved by what is best in us," and "The hues of sunset make life great." He thought rhythm indispensable, and rhyme most efficacious, as the curators of poetic thought. "Every good poem I know I recall by its rhythm also."

Popular instinct, recognized by those who compile our anthologies, forbids an author to be great in more than one way. These editors go to Emerson for point and wisdom, and too seldom for his truth to nature and his strictly poetic charm. Yet who excels him in quality? That Margaret Fuller had a fine ear, and an independent one, is proved by her admission that "in melody, in subtilty of thought and expression," he took the highest rank. He often captures us with absolute beauty, the poetry that poets love, — the lilt and melody of Shelley (whose vagueness irked him) joined to precision of thought and outline. Poe might have envied "Uriel" his lutings of the spangled heaven; he could not have read "Woodnotes," or he would have found something kindred in the bard who said, —

"Quit thy friends as the dead in doom,
And build to them a final tomb;
Let the starred shade that nightly falls
Still celebrate their funerals,
And the bell of beetle and of bee
Knell their melodious memory."

Emerson "listened to the undersong," but rejoiced no less in the "divine ideas below" of the Olympian bards,

"Which always find us young
And always keep us so."

His modes of expression, like his epithets, are imaginative. The snow is "the north-wind's masonry";

feeling and thought are scarcely deeper than his speech; he puts in words the "tumultuous privacy of storm," or the "sweet varieties of chance." With what high ecstasy of pain he calls upon the deep-eyed boy, the hyacinthine boy, of his marvellous "Threnody!" Time confirms the first impression that this is the most spontaneous, the most elevating, of lyrical elegies, — that it transcends even the divine verse of Bishop King's invocation to his entombed wife. How abrupt, how exquisitely ideal, the opening phrase! Afterward, and throughout, the pure spirit of poetry rarefied by the passion of its theme: the departed child is the superangelic symbol of the beauty, the excellence, that shall be when time ripens and the harmonies of nature are revealed, — when life is no longer a dream within a dream. Read the "Threnody" anew. What grace! What Æolian music, what yearning! What prophecy and exaltation! See how emotion becomes the soul of art. Or is it that true passion cannot but express itself in verse at once simple and sensuous, thus meeting all the cardinal points of Milton's law?

One readily perceives that "Merlin" conveys Emerson's spirited conception of the art and manners of the bard. His should be no trivial harp: —

"No jingling serenader's art,
Nor tinkle of piano strings;
The kingly bard
Must smite the cords rudely and hard,
As with hammer or with mace;
He shall not his brain encumber
With the coil of rhythm and number;
But leaving rule and pale forethought,
He shall aye climb
For his rhyme."

*The
"Thren-
ody."*

"Merlin."

*Emerson
and Whit-
man.*

Thus fearlessly should a poet compel the Muse ; and even to a broader liberty of song one, at least, of Emerson's listeners pushed with deliberate zeal. Walt Whitman was stimulated by this teaching, and by the rugged example of Garlyle, to follow resolutely the method which suited his bent and project ; and Emerson's "Mithridates," we may say, is at once the key-note and best defence of Whitman's untrammelled, all-heralding philosophy. The descriptive truth, the lusty Americanism, of the democratic chanter took hold upon the master's expectant heart. A later modification of the first welcome, and the omission of the new songs from "Parnassus," had no bearing upon the question of their morals or method ; Emerson was moved solely by his taste, — and New England taste has a supreme dislike of the unsavory. The world, even the Concord world, is not wholly given over to prudery. It has little dread, nowadays, of the voluptuous in art, ancient or modern. But to those of Puritan stock cleanliness is even more than godliness. There is no "fair perdition" tempting us in the "Song of Myself" and the "Children of Adam." But here are things which, whether vessels of honor or dishonor, one does not care to have before him too often or too publicly, and which were unattractive to the pure and temperate seer, whose race had so long inhabited the clean-swept keeping-rooms of the land of mountain breezes and transparent streams. The matter was one of artistic taste and of the inclinations of Emerson's nature, rather than of prudery or censorship.

*Favorite
poets and
measures.*

As for his own style, Emerson was impressed in youth by the free-hand manner of the early dramatists, whom he read with avidity. He soon formed his characteristic measure, varying with "sixes," "sevens,"

and "eights," resembling Ben Jonson's lyrical style, but even more like that of Milton, Marvell, and other worthies of the Protectorate. In spirit and imagery, in blithe dithyrambic wisdom, he gained much from his favorite Orientals — Saadi and Hafiz. One stately and various measure he rarely essayed, but showed that it was well suited to his genius. In "Musketaquid" and "Sea-Shore" we see the aptness of his ear and hand for blank verse. The little poem of "Days," imitated from the antique, is unmatched, outside of Landor, for compression and self-poise:—

"Days."

"Daughters of Time, the hypocritic Days,
Muffled and dumb like barefoot dervishes,
And marching single in an endless file,
Bring diadems and fagots in their hands.
To each they offer gifts after his will,
Bread, kingdoms, stars, and sky that holds them all. .
I, in my pleached garden, watched the pomp,
Forgot my morning wishes, hastily
Took a few herbs and apples, and the Day
Turned and departed silent. I, too late,
Under her solemn fillet saw the scorn."

We could wish that Emerson had written more blank verse, — a measure suited to express his highest thought and imagination. Probably, however, he said all that he had to say in verse of any kind. He was not open to add a single line for the sake of a more liberal product.

He is thought to have begun so near the top that there was little left to climb. None of his verse is more pregnant than that which came in the first glow, but the later poems are free from those grotesque sayings which illustrate the fact that humor and a lively sense of the absurd often are of slow development in the brain of an earnest thinker. There was, it must be owned, a tinge of provincial arrogance,

Changes in style.

"The
Sphinx"
again.

Strength
and
weakness
of tran-
scendental
verse.

and there were expressions little less than ludicrous, in his early defiance of usage. He was too sincere a personage to resort to the grotesque as a means of drawing attention. Of him, the leader, this at least could not be suspected. Years afterward he revised his poems, as if to avoid even the appearance of affectation. On the whole, it is as well that he left "The Sphinx" unchanged; that remarkable poem is a fair gauge of its author's traits. The opening is strongly lyrical and impressive. The close is the flower of poesy and thought. The general tone is quaint and mystical. Certain passages, however, like that beginning "The fiend that man harries," are curiously awkward, and mar the effect of an original, almost an epochal, poem. This would not be admitted by the old-fashioned Emersonian, — never, by any chance, a poet pure and simple, — who makes it a point of faith to defend the very passages where the master nods. Just so the thick-and-thin Brownigite, who testifies his adoration by counting the *m's* and *n's* of the great dramatist's volumes, and who, also, never is a poet pure and simple, celebrates Mr. Browning's least poetic experiments as his masterpieces. I think that the weakness of "transcendental" art is as fairly manifest in Emerson's first and chief collection of verse as were its felicities, — the former belonging to the school, the latter to the seer's own genius. Poe, to whom poetry was solely an expression of beauty, was irritated to a degree not to be explained by contempt for all things East. He extolled quaintness, and justly detested obscurity. He was prejudiced against the merits of such poets as Channing and Cranch by their prophetic bearing, which he berated soundly as an effort to set up as poets "of *unusual* depth and *very* remarkable powers

of mind." Admitting the grace of one, he said that it was "laughable to see that the transcendental poets, if beguiled for a minute or two into respectable English and common-sense, are always sure to remember their cue just as they get to the end of their song, and round off with a bit of doggerel." Their thought was the "cant of thought," in adopting which "the cant of phraseology is adopted at the same time." This was serviceable criticism, *et ab hoste*, though Poe's lack of moral, and keenness of artistic, sense made him too sure of the insincerity of those who place conviction above expression. And Mr. James sees that Emerson's philosophy was "drunk in by a great many fine moral appetites with a sense of intoxication." The seer himself was intoxicated at times, and spoke, like the hasheesh-eaters, with what then seemed to him music and sanity. In a more reflecting season he excluded from his select edition certain pieces from which too many had taken their cues,—for example, the "Ode" to W. H. Channing, "The World-Soul," and "Tact." The Ode begins finely with a manner caught from Ben Jonson's ode "To Himself," and we can ill spare one passage ("The God who made New Hampshire"); but was it the future compiler of "Parnassus" who preceded this with laughter-stirring rhymes, and shortly avowed that "Things are of the snake," and again that "Things are in the saddle, And ride mankind"? Well, he lived to feel that to poets, "of all men, the severest criticism is due," and that "Poetry requires that splendor of expression which carries with it the proof of great thoughts."

Poe on this school.

Philosophic "intoxication."

But the forte of bardlings is the foible of a bard. Emerson became his own censor, and did wisely and well. We have seen that his art, even now, upon its

Emerson his own best critic.

*Essay on
Art.*

*Its chief
canon.*

constructive side, must often seem defective, — unsatisfactory to those whose love of proportion is a moral instinct. Many poets and critics will feel it so. The student of Emerson learns that he, too, moved upon their plane, but would not be confined to it. More than other men, he found himself a vassal of the unwritten law, whether his impulse lifted him above, or sent him below, the plane of artistic expression. If he could not sustain the concert-pitch of his voice at his best, he certainly knew what is perfection, and said of art much that should be said. He was not, he did not wish to be, primarily an artist: he borrowed Art's aid for his lofty uses, and held her at her worth. His essay on Art would be pronounced sound by a Goethe or a Lessing, though such men probe less deep for the secret principle of things, and deal more feately with the exterior. Elsewhere he insists that we must "disabuse us of our superstitious associations with place and time, with number and size. . . . Where the heart is, there the muses, there the gods sojourn. . . . A great man makes his climate genial in the imagination of man, and its air the beloved element of all delicate spirits." And again (like Arnold) he speaks of the modernness of all good books: "What is well done, I feel as if I did; what is ill done, I reckon not of." He revised his prose less carefully, for republication, than his verse, and doubtless felt surer of it. He himself would have been the first to declare, as to the discordant and grotesque portions of his verse or prose, that the thought was proportionately defective, — not strong and pure enough to insure the beauty of the art which was its expression. Above all he knew, he confessed, that it is the first duty of a poet

they are universally intelligible, that they restore to us the simplest states of mind." This was his own canon. Where he failed of it, he might not surely know ; where he knew, there he rebuked himself. He struck out, in his self-distrust, many things of value to those who loved his verse. We dwell with profit on the fact that he retained so little that should be stricken out.

V.

It is but a foolish surmise whether Emerson's prose or verse will endure the longer, for they are of the same stuff, warp and woof, and his ideality crosses and recrosses each, so that either is cloth-of-gold. Of whichever a reader may first lay hold, he will be led to examine the whole fabric of the author's work. Few writers, any one of whose essays, met with for the first time, seems more like a revelation ! It will not be, I think, until that time when all his prose has passed into a large book, such as the volume we call *Montaigne*, that its full strength and importance can be felt. In certain respects it dwarfs other modern writing, and places him among the great essayists. These are not the efforts of a reviewer of books or affairs, but chapters on the simplest, the greatest, the immemorial topics, those that lie at the base of life and wisdom : such as Love, Experience, Character, Manners, Fate, Power, Worship — lastly, Nature herself, and Art her ideal counterpart. If to treat great themes worthily is a mark of greatness, the chooser of such themes begins with the instinct of great design. Bacon's elementary essays excepted, there are none in English of which it can be more truly averred that there is nothing superfluous in them. Compare them with the rest in theme and method. Carlyle, outside

His prose writings.

"*Nature*,"
1836.

"*Essays*,"
First Series,
1841.

"*Essays*,"
Second Series,
1844.

"*Miscellanies*,"
1849.

"*Representative Men*,"
1850.

"*English Traits*,"
1856.

"*Conduct of Life*,"
1860.

"*Society
and Soli-
tude*,"
1870.

"*Letters
and Social
Aims*,"
1876.

His style.

*Apo-
thegms.*

of "Sartor Resartus" and "Hero-Worship," usually reviews books, histories, individuals, at extreme length, and with dramatic comment and analysis. Emerson treats of the principles behind all history, and his laconic phrases are the very honey-cells of thought. There are let-downs and surplusage even in Landor. Throughout Emerson's writings each word is of value ; they are the discourse of one who has digested all the worthy books, and who gives us their results, with latter-day discoveries of his own. He is the citizen of a new world, observing other realms and eras from an unrestricted point of view.

The intent of our essayist is the highest, and by no means that of writing for the exercise or glory of authorship. "Fatal," he declares, "to the man of letters is the lust of display. . . . A mistake of the main end to which they labor is incidental to literary men, who, dealing with the organ of language . . . learn to enjoy the pride of playing with this splendid engine, but rob it of its almightiness by failing to work with it." He estimates books at their worth. They "are for nothing but to inspire. I had better never see a book than to be warped by its attraction clean out of my own orbit, and made a satellite instead of a system."

Thus the thought of Style, it may be, should enter into the mind of neither writer nor reader. Style makes itself, and Emerson's is the apothegmatic style of one bent upon uttering his immediate thoughts, — hence strong in sentences, and only by chance suited to the formation of an essay. Each sentence is an idea, an epigram, or an image, or a flash of spiritual light. His letters to Carlyle show that he was at one time caught by the manner of the author whose character, at least, seemed of the most import to him. This was but a passing trace. When he was fresh from the schools,

his essays were structural and orderly, but more abstract than in latter years. During his mature and happily less spiritual period, had he cared to write a history, the English would have been pure English, the narrative racy and vigorous. Portions of the "English Traits" make this plain. Since De Foe, where have we found anything more idiomatic than his account of Wordsworth delivering a sonnet?

*Native
English.*

"This recitation was so unlooked for and surprising, — he, the old Wordsworth, standing apart, and reciting to me in a garden-walk, like a schoolboy declaiming, — that I at first was near to laugh; but recollecting myself, that I had come thus far to see a poet, and he was chanting poems to me, I saw that he was right and I was wrong, and gladly gave myself up to hear."

Note also Emerson's account of an ocean voyage. For charm of landscape-painting, take such a passage as that, in the second essay on Nature, beginning: "There are days which occur in this climate." But terseness is the distinctive feature of his style. "Men," he says, "descend to meet." "We are all discerners of spirits." "He [a traveller] carries ruins to ruins." No one has compressed more sternly the pith of his discourse.

Compression.

No poet, let us at once add, has written prose and shown more incontestably his special attribute. Emerson's whole argument is poetic, if that work is poetic which reaches its aim through the analogies of things, and whose quick similitudes have the heat, the light, the actinism, of the day-beam, and of which the language is rhythmic without degeneracy, — clearly the language of prose, always kept from weakness by the thought which it conveys. No man's writing was more truly his speech, and no man's speech so rhythmic: "There are Muses in the woods to-day, and whispers

*The prose
of a poet.*

*Rhythmic,
and full
of noble
imagery.*

to be heard in the breezes"; and again, "Hawthorne rides well his horse of the night." As he spoke, so he wrote: "Give me health and a day, and I will make the pomp of emperors ridiculous"; "The conscious ship hears all the praise"; of young idealists, "The tough world had its revenge the moment they put the horses of the sun to plough in its furrow"; of Experience, "was it Boscovich who found out that bodies never come in contact? Well, souls never touch their objects. An innavigable sea washes with silent waves between us and the things we aim at and converse with." In the same essay, — "Dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end to illusion. Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and as we pass through them, they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue."¹ And of Love's world, with the cadences of Ecclesiastes, — "When the day was not long enough, but the night, too, must be consumed. . . . When the moonlight was a pleasing fever, and the stars were letters, and the flowers ciphers, and the air was coined into song; when all business seemed impertinence, all the men and women running to and fro in the streets mere pictures." But to show the poetry of Emerson's prose is to give the whole of it; these essays are of the few which make us tolerate the conceit of "prose poems." Their persistent recourse to imagery and metaphor, their suggestions of the secret relations of things, at times have subjected them to the charge of being obscure. The fault was not in the wine: —

"Hast thou a drunken soul?

Thy bane is in thy shallow skull, not in my silver bowl!"

¹ "Life, like a dome of many-colored glass,
Stains the white radiance of eternity."
Shelley's "Adonais."

In mature years the essayist pays more regard to life about him, to the world as it is ; he is more equatorial, less polar and remote. His insight betrays itself in every-day wisdom. He is the shrewd, the benignant, the sagacious, Emerson, writing with pleasant aptitude, like Hesiod or Virgil, of domestic routine, and again of the Conduct of Life, of Manners, Behavior, Prudence, Grace. This is in the philosophic order of progress, from the first principles to the application of them. Some of his followers, however, take him to task, unwilling that the master should venture beyond the glory of his cloud. As for his unique treatises upon Behavior, it was natural that he should be led to think upon that topic, since in gentle bearing, in his sweetness, persuasiveness, and charm of smile and voice, he was not excelled by any personage of our time, and what he said of it is of more value than the sayings of those who think such a matter beneath his regard. His views of civic duty and concerning the welfare of the Republic are the best rejoinder to his early strictures upon Homer and Shakespeare for the temporal and local features of their master-works. As a critic he was ever expectant, on the lookout for something good and new, and sometimes found the one good thing in a man or work and valued it unduly. When he made a complete examination, as in his chapter on Margaret Fuller, he excelled as a critic and delineator. *Parnassus* is not judicial, but oddly made up of his own likings, yet the best rules of criticism are to be found in its preface. With the exception of "English Traits," he published no long treatise upon a single theme. His general essays and lectures, however, constitute a treatise upon Man and Nature, and of themselves would serve as America's adequate con-

See the
"Complete
Works,"
1885.

"*Parnas-
sus*," 1874.

tribution to the English literature of his period. . We are told of an unprinted series of his essays that may be grouped as a book on the Natural History of the Intellect. Should these see the light, it would be curious to compare them with the work of some professional logician — with the standard treatise of President Porter, for instance — upon a similar theme. Something in quantity may yet be added to Emerson's literary remains. But it will not differ in quality ; we have had the gist of it : for he was a writer who, though his essays were the fruit of a prolonged life, never wrote himself out. Often an author has gained repute by one or two original works, while his ordinary efforts, if not devoted to learned or scientific research, have been commonplace. The flame of Emerson's intellect never fades or flickers, and never irks us. It burns with elemental light, neither of artifice nor of occasion, serene as that of a star, and with an added power to heat the distance which receives it.

VI.

*Our most
typical
and inspir-
ing poet.*

IN summing up the traits of Emerson one almost ceases to be critical, lest the highest praise may not be quite undue. More than when Bion died, the glades and towns lament him, for he left no heir to the Muse which he taught his pupils. In certain respects he was our most typical poet, having the finest intuition and a living faith in it, — and because there was a sure intellect behind his verse, and because his influence affected not simply the tastes and emotions, but at last the very spirit, of his countrymen. He began where many poets end, seeking at once the upper air, the region of pure thought and ideality. His speech was wisdom, and his poesy its exhalation.

When he failed in either, it seemed to be through excess of divining. His triumphs were full of promise for those who dare to do their best. He was as far above Carlyle as the affairs of the soul and universe are above those of the contemporary, or even the historic, world. His problem, like that of Archimedes, was more than the taking of cities and clash of arms. The poet is unperturbed by temporal distractions ; yet poets and dreamers, concerned with the ideal, share in the world's battle equally with men of action and practical life. Only, while the latter fight on the ground, the idealists, like the dauntless ghosts of the Huns and Romans, lift the contest to the air. Emerson was the freest and most ideal of them all, and what came to him by inheritance or prophetic forecast he gave like a victor. He strove not to define the creeds, but to stimulate the intellect and purpose of those who are to make the future. If poetry be that which shapes and elevates, his own was poetry indeed. To know the heart of New England you must hear the songs of his compeers ; but listening to those of Emerson, the east and west have yielded to the current of its soul.

The supreme poet will be not alone a seer, but also a persistent artist of the beautiful. Of those who come before the time for such a poet is ripe, Longfellow on the whole has done the most to foster the culture of poetry among us as a liberal art. Emerson has given us thought, the habit of thinking, the will to think for ourselves. He drained the vats of politics and philosophy, for our use, of all that was sweet and fructifying, and taught his people self-judgment, self-reliance, and to set their courses by the stars. He placed chief value upon those primitive laws which are the only sure basis of national law and let-

*Emerson
and Long-
fellow.*

ters. And as a poet, his verse was the sublimation of his rarest mood, that changed as water into cloud, catching the first beams of sunrise on its broken edges, yet not without dark and vaguely blending spots between. Emerson and Longfellow came at the parting of the ways. They are of the very few whom we now recognize as the true founders of an American literature. No successors with more original art and higher imagination can labor to more purpose. If the arrow hits its mark, the aim was at the bowstring; the river strengthens and broadens, but the sands of gold wash down from near its source.

*"A poet
hidden in
the light of
thought."*

Not a few are content with that poetry which returns again and again to its primal conceptions, yet suggests infinite pathways and always inspires, — the poetry of a hermitage whose Lar is Nature, and whose well-spring flows with clear and shining Thought. To such, — who care less for sustained flights of objective song, who can withdraw themselves from passion and dramatic life, who gladly accept isolated cadences and scattered, though exquisite, strains of melody in lieu of symphonic music "wandering on as loth to die," — Emerson will seem the most precious of our native poets. He will not satisfy those who look for the soul incarnate in sensuous and passionate being. Such readers, with Professor Dowden, find him the type of the New World transcendentalist, the creature of the drying American climate, one "whose nervous energy has been exalted," so "that he loves light better than warmth." He is not the minstrel for those who would study men in action and suffering, rather than as heirs to knowledge and the raptured mind. He is not a warrior, lover, raconteur, dramatist, but an evangelist and seer. The greatest poet must be all in one, and I have said that Emerson

*"Unbod-
ied joy."*

was among the foremost to avow it. Modern bards poorly satisfy him, being meagre of design, and failing to guide and console. Wordsworth was an exception, yet he had "written longer than he was inspired." Tennyson, with all his tune and color, "climbs no mount of vision." Even Shakespeare was too traditional, though one learns from him that "tradition supplies a better fable than any invention can." In face of the greatest he felt that "the world still wants its poet-priest, a reconciler, who shall not trifle with Shakespeare the player, nor shall grope in graves with Swedenborg the mourner; but who shall see, speak, and act with equal inspiration." Thus clearly he conceived of the poet's office, and equally was he assured that he himself was not, and could not be, the perfect musician. He chose the part of the forerunner and inspirer, and when the true poet shall come to America, it will be because such an one as Emerson has gone before him and prepared the way for his song, his vision, and his recognition.

*Emerson's
conception
of the
future
bard.*

CHAPTER VI.

HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW.

I.

*Fortunate
in life and
death.*

OUR poet of grace and sentiment left us in the after-glow of an almost ideal career. He had lived at the right time, and with the gift of years ; and he died before the years came for him to say, I have no pleasure in them. Not all the daughters of music were brought low. He scarcely could have realized that people were calling his work elementary, that men whose originality had isolated them, like Emerson and Browning, — and even metrical experts, the inventors of new modes, — were gaining favor with a public which had somewhat outgrown him ; that he was to be slighted for the very qualities which had made him beloved and famous, or that other qualities, too long needed, were to be overvalued as if partly for the need's sake.

*His mis-
sion apo-
stolic.*

But they are wrong who make light of Longfellow's service as an American poet. His admirers may form no longer a critical majority, yet he surely helped to quicken the New World sense of beauty, and to lead a movement which precedes the rise of a national school. I think that the poet himself, reading his own sweet songs, felt the apostolic nature of his mission, — that it was religious, in the etymological sense of the word, the binding back of America to the Old World taste and imagination. Our true rise of Poe-

try may be dated from Longfellow's method of exciting an interest in it, as an expression of beauty and feeling, at a time when his countrymen were ready for something more various and human than the current meditations on nature. It was inevitable that he should first set his face toward a light beyond the sea, and I have said that his youthful legend aptly was *Outre Mer*. An escape was in order from the asceticism which two centuries had both modified and confirmed. How could this be effected? Not at once by the absolute presentation of beauty. A Keats, pledged to this alone, could not have propitiated the ancestral spirit. Puritanism was opposed to beauty as a strange god, and to sentiment as an idle thing. Longfellow so adapted the beauty and sentiment of other lands to the convictions of his people, as to beguile their reason through the finer senses, and speedily to satisfy them that loveliness and righteousness may go together. His poems, like pictures seen on household walls, were a protest against barrenness and the symptoms of a new taste.

They made their way more readily, also, by their response to the inherited Anglo-Saxon instincts of his own region. His early predilections, strengthened during a stay in Germany, were chiefly for the poetry and romance of that land. He read his heart in its songs, which he so loved to translate for us. A new generation may be at a loss to conceive the effect of Longfellow's work when it first began to appear. I may convey something of this by what is at once a memory and an illustration. Take the case of a child whose Sunday outlook was restricted, in a decaying Puritan village, to a wooden meeting-house of the old Congregational type. The interior — plain, colorless, rigid with dull white pews and dismal galleries

*Effect of
his early
works.*

*A charm
recalled
and illus-
trated.*

—increased the spiritual starvation of a young nature unconsciously longing for color and variety. Many a child like this one, on a first holiday visit to the town, seeing the vine-grown walls, the roofs and arches, of a graceful Gothic church, has felt a sense of something rich and strange; and many, now no longer children, can remember that the impression upon entrance was such as the stateliest cathedral now could not renew. The columns and tinted walls, the ceiling of oak and blue, the windows of gules and azure and gold,—the service, moreover, with its chant and organ-roll,—all this enraptured and possessed them. To the one relief hitherto afforded them, that of nature's picturesqueness,—which even Calvinism endured without compunction,—was added a new joy, a glimpse of the beauty and sanctity of human art. A similar delight awaited the first readers of Longfellow's prose and verse. Here was a painter and romancer indeed, who had journeyed far and returned with gifts for all at home, and who promised often and again to

—“sing a more wonderful song
Or tell a more marvellous tale.”

*His genius
not crea-
tive, but
the fosterer
of
taste and
ideality.*

And thus it chanced that, well as he afterward sang of his own sea and shore, he now is said to have been the least national of our poets. His verse, it is true, was like a pulsatory cord, sustaining our new-born ideality with nourishment from the mother-land, until it grew to vigor of its own. Yet he was more widely read than his associates, and seemed to foreigners the incumbent American laureate. His native themes, like some of Tennyson's, were chosen with deliberation and as if for their availability. But from the first he was a poet of sentiment and equally a

best ; neither toil nor trouble could dismay him until art had done its perfect work. It was a kind of genius, — his sure perception of the fit and attractive. Love flows to one whose work is lovely. Besides, he was a devotee to one calling, — not a critic, journalist, lecturer, or man of affairs, — and even his prose romances were akin to poems. A long and spotless life was pledged to song, and verily he had his reward. Successors may find a weakness in his work, but who can rival him in bearing and reputation ? His worldly wisdom was of the gospel kind, so gently tempered as to breed no evil. His life and works together were an edifice fairly built, — the House Beautiful, whose air is peace, where repose and calm are ministrant, and where the raven's croak, symbol of the unrest of a more perturbed genius, is never heard. Thus the clerkly singer fulfilled his office, — which was not in the least creative, — and had the tributes he most desired : love and honor during his life-time, and the assurance that no song of his took flight but to rest again and again "in the heart of a friend."

II.

POETS, like the cicalas, have occasion to envy those who compass their song and sustenance together. Few can pledge with Longfellow their lives, or even frequent hours, to the labor they delight in. There was, in fact, an "opening," — a need for just the service he could render. The circumstances of his birth and training were propitious and worked to one end. Neither he nor Hawthorne was the mere offspring of an environment. There was nothing special in the little down-east school of Bowdoin, sixty years ago, to breed the leaders of our imaginative prose and verse.

An auspicious time.

Henry
Wad-
sworth
Longfel-
low: born
in Port-
land, Me.,
Feb. 27,
1807.

But the time was ripe; there was an unspoken demand for richer life and thought, to which such natures, and the intellects of Channing and Emerson, were sure to respond. And the concurrence certainly was special: that Longfellow, descended from Pilgrim and Puritan stock, the child of a cultured household, should be born not only with a poet's voice and ear, but with an aptitude for letters amounting to a sixth sense, — a bookishness assimilative as that of Hunt or Lamb; that he should be reared in a typical Eastern town, open alike to polite influences and to the freshness and beauty of the northern sea; that such a youth, buoyant and manly, but averse to the coarser sports, gentle, pure, — one who in France would have become at first an abbé, — should in New England be made a college professor at nineteen, and commissioned to visit Europe and complete his studies; that ten years later, having ended the pleasant drudgery of his apprenticeship, he should find himself settled for life at Harvard, the centre of learning, and under few obligations that did not assist, rather than impede, his chosen ministry of song. Here he was to have health, friendship, ease, the opportunity for travel, abundant and equal work and fame, with scarcely an abrupt turn, or flurry, or drought or storm, to the very end. Even his duties served in the direction of a literary bent, confirming his mastery of languages whose poetry and romance were his treasure-house. He wrote his text-books at an age when most poets go a-gypsying. When twenty-six, he made his translation of the "Coplas de Manrique," — a rendering so grave and sonorous that, if now first printed, it would be caught up like FitzGerald's "Rubáiyát of Omar" instead of going to the paper mill. It indi-

"Coplas
de Man-
rique,"
1833.

a true poetic method was forming in a country where Berkeley's muse thus far had made no course of empire. A few essays, always on literature or the languages, complete the round of his miscellanies, the last being contributed to a review in 1840. After that time he gave up all critical writing whatsoever.

Outre-Mer, a young poet's sketch-book, reports his first transition from cloister life to travel and experience. It is a journey of sentiment, if not a sentimental journey, and made in the blithesome spirit of a troubadour. All the world was Arcady, — a land of beauty and romance; and these he found, caring for nothing else, in sunny nooks of France, Italy, and Spain, as deftly as the botanist picks out his ferns and forest flowers. Our poet's herbarium had a gift to keep its blossoms unfaded. His road-glasses illuminate the wayside: our modern travellers use stronger lenses, and see things through and through, but with the old illusions we have lost the best of all things — zest. *Hyperion* showed what changes four years can bring about while still the man is young: it is the thoughtful, and somewhat too fond, fantasy of the same pilgrim after more knowledge of the verities of life. The atmosphere of this book is that of Switzerland and Germany; but its shadows came from the maker's heart. He had been bereaved. The opening phrase is grief, a poet's grief, that consoles itself with imagery: "The setting of a great hope is like the setting of the sun. . . . We look forward into the coming lonely night. The soul withdraws into itself. Then stars arise, and the night is holy." This precise, epicurean touch, the application of art to feeling, was new in our authorship. Void of real anguish or passion, it still suggested an ideal, — a purpose beyond mere book-craft. The sketches, diversified with

*Works in
prose:
"Outre-
Mer,"*
1835.

"Hyperion," 1839.

*Influence
of Richter
and Heine.*

*"The
scroll of
Youth."*

not too frequent musing, the wedding of sound to sense, the daintiness of words, the feeble plot, all bear witness that "Hyperion" is the work of an idyllist. The vague manner, with its impression of rest sought in restlessness, and even the broken story, were borrowed, doubtless, from "Titan." The book naturally became the companion of all romantic pilgrims of the Rhine, for the true German spirit is here; its sentiment and fancy alike are seized by a master of the picturesque. He "knew the beauteous river all by heart,—every rock and ruin, every echo, every legend. The ancient castles, . . . they were all his; for his thoughts dwelt in them, and the wind told him tales." With Jean Paul we have Heine, also, who might have conceived the grotesque episode of Frau Kranich's "tea" in Ems. The romance and spooning of "Hyperion," and its moral conclusions, are food for adolescents; but it is easier to laugh at youth than to possess it. And this is Longfellow's youth throughout,—the frankest of confessions. Paul Flemming "buried himself in books; in old dusty books." Read the list of them, from the Nibelungenlied down, and see the diet that he garnished with grapes and Liebfrauenmilch and love-making and moonlight dreams. "How beautiful it is to love!" Ah! how happy to be young, and in love; to have known sorrow, and to use it as a foil; to visit and read the great world, yet not to be corrupted by it, still to keep a pure heart that has no taste for recklessness and vice; through all to recall one lesson: "Look not mournfully into the Past. It comes not back again. Wisely improve the Present. It is thine. Go forth to meet the shadowy Future, without fear, and with a manly heart."

The chief import of the poet's romances was their

bearing upon his own purpose. He fixed his rules of life by writing them down. His second maxim is found in *Kavanagh*, a tale with less freshness than "Hyperion," but fashioned with the hand of greater mastery, that of a writer in his prime. Its personages are more distinctly drawn, and it was his brief and nearest approach to a novel. We have a transcript of New England village life, an atmosphere of breeding and refinement, and some pertinent criticism on literary and social topics. As before, the gist of the tale is in a text, placed, with due regard to convention, at the beginning:—

"The flighty purpose never is o'ertook
Unless the deed go with it."

This bit of wisdom had been deeply considered by the author. By way of strengthening himself against a dreamer's temptation to be derelict, he worked it, one might say, into this "sampler" of a tale. Those who are fond of citing the formula, that genius is only a talent for persistent work, have reason to place our poet well in the van of their examples. Yet I fancy that only men of talent will heartily subscribe to this definition. Be this as it may, Longfellow's prose tales show us his equipment, and give the clew to his well-adjusted life. It was plain, also, that he was a born romanticist, in full sympathy with the German school. We shall see that, as a poet, he followed a romantic method, to the disapproval of those who feel that nothing in the New World should be done as it has been done elsewhere. It is difficult, however, to explain why even things at home should not be treated according to the genius of the designer. After strange experiments, we just now are discovering that the colonial architecture, so much like that of Cromwell's

*The poet's
rules of
life.*

"*Kavanagh*,"
1849.

*Romantic
tendency.*

England, is of all our styles the best adapted to the Atlantic States ; and it still becomes us to be modest in defining the types that American art and poetry finally will assume. The critical question, I take it, is not what fashion should be outlawed, but whether the thing done is good of its kind.

Nothing afterward tempted Longfellow from poetic composition, except the illustrations of the *Poetry of Europe*, many of which were his own translations, and, late in life, the diversion of editing *Poems of Places*, and the heroic labor of his complete version of "The Divine Comedy," a work to which I shall refer again.

III.

*Poetical
works.*

*"Voices
of the
Night,"
1839.*

*Foreign
influences.*

LONGFELLOW'S juvenile poems have been collected recently. Those printed, before his graduation, in "The Literary Gazette," resemble the verse of Bryant and Percival, the former of whom he looked upon as his master. Tracings of browsing in the usual pasture grounds are strangely absent : I sometimes wonder if he had an early taste for the Elizabethan poets, or, indeed, for any English worthy, since no modern author has shown fewer signs of this in youth. The *Voices of the Night*, his own first collection, was postponed until after a long experience of translation and prose work. It appeared in his thirty-third year, and met with instant favor. Only nine new pieces were in the book ; these, with the translations following, have characteristics that his verse continued to display. The Prelude recalls that of Heine's third edition of the "Reisebilder" (*Das ist der alte Märchenwald*), then just published. Later pieces show that Longfellow caught the manner of this poet, whose principles he severely condemned. The German's

rhythm and reverie were repeated in "The Day is Done," "The Bridge," "Twilight," etc., but not his passion and scorn. The influence of Uhland is equally manifest elsewhere. Prototypes of Longfellow's maturer work are found in "The Reaper," "The Psalm of Life," and "The Beleaguered City." "The Midnight Mass for the Dying Year," against which Poe brought a mincing charge of plagiarism, is as strong and conjuring as anything its author lived to write. The Translations deserved high praise. The stately "Coplas" re-appears. Various renderings from German lyric poets, such as "The Happiest Land," "Beware," and "Into the Silent Land," were new originals, examples of a talent peculiarly his own. Given a task which he liked, — with a pattern supplied by another, — and few could equal him. He made his copies in various measures and from many tongues. An essay in hexameter, the version of Tegnér's "Children of the Lord's Supper," preceded his original poems in that form. Even after completing his "Dante," he loved to toy with such work. I have heard him say that he longed to make an English translation of Homer, upon the method which Voss had used to such advantage.

His volume of 1841, *Ballads and Other Poems*, may be likened to Tennyson's volume of the ensuing year, in that it confirmed its author's standing and indicated the full extent of his genius as a poet. It was choice in its way, suggesting taste rather than fertility; choicely presented, also, for with it came the fashion, new to this country, of printing verse attractively and in a shape that seeks the hand. The poet's matter, if often gleaned from foreign literatures, was novel to his readers, and his style distinct from that of any English contemporary. The book

"*Ballads and Other Poems*,"
1841.
Cp. "*Victorian Poets*":
pp. 158-160.

The poet's quality now apparent.

*Lyrical
homilies.**Sentiment.**Picture-
sequence.*

contains examples of all the classes into which his poems seem to divide themselves, and may be examined with its successors. One sees, forthwith, that Longfellow's impulse was to make a poem, above all, *interesting*. He was no word-monger, no winder of coil upon coil about a subtle theme. He changed his topics, for some topic he must have, and one that suited him. A cheerful acceptance of the lessons of life was the moral, suggested in many lyrics, which commended him to all virtuous, home-keeping folk, but in the end poorly served him with the critics. He gained a foothold by his least poetic work, — verse whose easy lessons are adjusted to common needs; by the "Psalm of Life," "Excelsior," "Prometheus," and "The Ladder of St. Augustine," — little sermons in rhyme that are sure to catch the ear and to become hackneyed as a sidewalk song. He often taught, by choice, the primary class, and the upper form is slow to forget it. Next above these pretty homilies are his poems of sentiment and twilight brooding. "The Reaper and the Flowers," "Footsteps of Angels," "Maidenhood," "Resignation," and "Haunted Houses" came home to pensive and gentle natures. Lowell has written a few kindred pieces, such as "The Changeling" and "The First Snow-fall." A still higher class, testing Longfellow's eye for the suggestive side of a theme and his art to make the most of it, includes "The Fire of Drift-Wood," "The Lighthouse," "Sand of the Desert," "The Jewish Cemetery," and "The Arsenal." In poems of this sort he was a skilled designer, yet they were something more than art for art's sake. Owing to the tenderness seldom absent from his work, he often has been called a poet of the Affections. It

well. He combined beauty with feeling in lyrical trifles which rival those of Tennyson and other masters of technique, and was almost our earliest maker of verse that might be termed exquisite. "The Bells of Lynn" and "The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls," show that the hand which polished "Curfew" and "The Arrow and the Song" was sensitive to the last.

Taste.

Among obvious tests of a poet are his voice, facility, and general aim. Longfellow's verse was refined and pleasing; his purpose, evidently not that of a doctrinaire. The anti-slavery poems did not come, like Whittier's, from a fiery heart, or rival Lowell's in humor and disdain. They simply manifest his recognition and artistic treatment of an existing evil. The ballad of "The Quadroon Girl" is a poem, not a prophecy, with a pathos beautified by certain "values," as a painter might term them, — the tropic shore, the lagoon, the island planter's daughter and slave. Of the higher tests of poetic genius, — spontaneity, sweep, intellect, imaginative power, — what examples has he left us? At times the highest of all, imagination, in passages where he foregoes the conceits and fancies that so possessed him. We have it in the "Midnight Mass"; in "Sir Humphrey Gilbert"; in "The Spanish Jew's Tale," when

*Not a
polemic
reformer.*

*Tests of
genius.*

— "straight into the city of the Lord
The Rabbi leaped with the Death-Angel's sword,
And through the streets there swept a sudden breath
Of something there unknown, which men call death."

At times also we have what is of almost equal worth, imaginative treatment. This is felt in the effect of his very best lyrics, a series of ballads, with "The Skeleton in Armor" at their front both in date and in merit. This vigorous poem opens with a rare abrupt-

*Imagin-
ative
Ballads.
"The
Skeleton
in Ar-
mor," etc.*

ness. The author, full of the Norseland, was inspired by his novel theme, and threw off a ringing carol of the sea-rover's training, love, adventure. The cadences and imagery belong together, and the measure, that of Drayton's "Agincourt," is better than any new one for its purpose. Even the poet's conceits are braver than their wont :—

" Then from those cavernous eyes
Pale flashes seemed to rise,
As when the northern skies
Gleam in December ;
And, like the water's flow
Under December's snow,
Came a dull voice of woe
From the heart's chamber."

Elsewhere he is as resonant as the bard of England's "King Harry" :—

" And as to catch the gale
Round veered the flapping sail,
Death ! was the helmsman's hail,
Death without quarter !
Midships with iron keel
Struck we her ribs of steel ;
Down her black hulk did reel
Through the black water !"

To old-fashioned people this heroic ballad, written over forty years ago, is worth a year's product of what I may term Kensington-stitch verse. A few others, mostly of the sea, count high in any estimate of Longfellow. "The Wreck of the Hesperus," though not without blemishes, "Sir Humphrey Gilbert," "Victor Galbraith," and "The Cumberland" are treated, I think, imaginatively. Boker's noble stanzas on the sinking of the Cumberland follow more closely the old ballad style, but Longfellow plainly found a style of

licitous : witness the touching, sympathetic imagery of "The Two Angels," the joyous grace of the chanson for Agassiz's birthday. "Hawthorne," "Bayard Taylor," and "Killed at the Ford" are examples of the fitness with which his emotion and poetic quality corresponded, each to each. But neither war nor grief ever too much disturbed the artist soul. Tragedy went no deeper with him than its pathos ; it was another element of the beautiful. Death was a luminous transition. "The Warden of the Cinque Ports" is all melody and association. He made a scenic threnody, knowing the laureate would supply an intellectual characterization of the Iron Duke. His fancy dwells upon the ancient and high-sounding title, the mist and sunrise of the Channel, and the rolling salute from all those rampart guns, that yet could not arouse the old Field-Marshal from his slumber. Tennyson fills his grander strophes with the sturdy valor and wisdom of the last great Englishman, but within our own poet's bounds the result is just as undeniably a poem.

Longfellow, employing regular forms of verse, was flexible where many are awkward, — at ease in his fine clothes. "Rain in Summer," "To a Child," and a few longer poems yet to be examined, such as "The Building of the Ship," are written with a free hand. In his latter period he often used an anapestic movement, first discoverable in "The Saga of King Olaf" and "Enceladus," afterward in "Belisarius," "The Chamber over the Gate," and "Helen of Tyre." The impression conveyed is that we listen to one whose day for elaborate song is past, but whose voice still warbles in the fresh break of spring or the melting twilight of thankfulness and rest. With age, his natural tenderness grew upon him, as men's traits will for good and bad. "The Children's Hour" is one of the

A metrical expert.

"My Lost
Youth."

inimitable fireside songs that made this "old moustache" the children's poet. Another delightful lyric, "My Lost Youth," was the utterance of a man who in middle age looked in his own heart to write, and found it warm and true. To comprehend its charm and sincerity, one, perchance, must also have loitered in youth along the piers, sending his hopes far across the whispering ocean to the untried world ; must himself remember

— "the black wharves and the slips,
And the sea-tides tossing free ;
And Spanish sailors with bearded lips,
And the beauty and mystery of the ships,
And the magic of the sea."

Some breezy dome of trees, with sounds and shadows like those of Deering's woods, must still haunt his memory, if he would recall

"The song and the silence in the heart,
That in part are prophecies, and in part
Are longings wild and vain ;
And the voice of that fitful song
Sings on, and is never still :
' A boy's will is the wind's will,
And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts.'"

Of all these poems, the swallow-flights of many seasons, not one falls short of a certain standard of grace and correctness ; and the same may be said of the author's more pretentious works, to which we now come. Meanwhile it is to be noted that he was the first American to compose sustained narrative-poems that gained and kept a place in literature. In fact, since the Georgian period, there has been no other poet of our tongue, save Tennyson, whose longer productions have been greeted by the public with the interest bestowed upon the successive works of novelists in the front rank.



Henry W. L.

*Kingsley's
"Andromeda."*

verse"; even those of Mr. Arnold have "no metrical feet at all," but sound like "anapests broken up and driven wrong"; Clough's are admirable "studies in graduated prose"; Hawtrey's "faultless, English, hexametrical," but only "a well-played stroke," not continuable; Kingsley's "Andromeda," the "one good poem extant in that pernicious metre," and even Kingsley's feet are but "loose, rhymeless anapests." Now "Andromeda," a delicious poem for poets, never will commend its measure to the multitude, since it never will reach them. But if such lines as these, —

"Far through the wine-dark depths of the crystal, the gardens
of Nereus,
Coral and sea-fan and tangle, the blooms and the palms of
the ocean,"

*A wrong
premise.*

are essentially anapestic, it is because one chooses to read them so; and any dactylic verse of Homer may be transposed in the same way by reading it accentually and ignoring the first and last syllables. When Mr. Swinburne adds, "Such as pass elsewhere for English hexameter, I do hope, are impossible to Eton," he strikes the key-note of the misunderstanding. The same premise is always implied, to wit: that classical analogies should govern our opinion of this measure. Unfortunately, I say, even the arguments of its defenders are based on the notion that the modern verse may approximate to the antique, in which effort, of course, it always must fail. Poe, in his turn, opposed Longfellow's hexameters because they were not classical; yet he unconsciously paid tribute to them as an English form of verse, when he said that their admirers were "deceived by the facility with which some of these verses may be read!" Lord Derby anticipated Mr. Swinburne's "pernicious metre," in denounc-

'ENGLISH HEXAMETER' VERSE.

ing "that pestilent heresy of the so-called English hexameter," which "can only be pressed into the service by a violation of every rule of prosody." Whether or not the noble translator, deprived of rules of prosody, would have found it hard to write verse at all, it is plain that here again crops out the fallacy of the discussion. Fixed rules of quantitative or classical verse must be put out of mind. The question ought to be, simply: Is the verse, in six feet, of "Evangeline" or "Andromeda" a good and readable measure for an English poem?

Bryant, a good writer of blank verse, disliked a measure which he found unsuited to his slow and dignified movement. Professor Lewis took the ground of Mr. Bryant, whose Homer he so much praised. Mr. Lang is on the same side, and has said that not even Professor Arnold can alter his opinion. Yet the late Professor Hadley, an almost matchless scholar, advocated this verse for Homeric translation. Messrs. Lowell, Higginson, and Stoddard are among its friends. Matthew Arnold, in the delightful papers "On Translating Homer," has made his strongest plea for the English hexameter by unconsciously granting that its close approximation to the antique type must be the result of adroit labor, not of unstudied expression. Such a result justly might be deemed an artifice, distinct from natural English verse. And Mr. Arnold, in view of the reception awarded "Evangeline," also sees that the dislike of our present English hexameter is "rather among the professional critics than the general public." A liking for it, on the part of many poets, is evident from their successive experiments. Longfellow's foreign studies influenced his own decision in its favor; since then we have had Kingsley's

*Accent
and quan-
tity.*

*Ultimate
character-
istics.
Cp. "Vic-
torian
Poets":
p. 251.*

ent," Taylor's rhythmic "Pastorals," and, more recently, Mr. Munby's idyl of "Dorothy" in the elegaic measure, and its Hellenic counter-type, the "Delphic Days" of Mr. Snider. But while there are both faith and practice in favor of the hexametric verse, it is still in a stage of growth. Mr. Arnold a second time reaches the mark when he implies that its capabilities are not yet evident; that, "even now, if a version of the Iliad in English hexameter were made by a poet who, like Mr. Longfellow, has that indefinable quality which renders him popular, — something *attractive* in his talent which communicates itself to his verses, — it would have a great success among the general public." He expected yet to see an improved type of this verse, which should excel Voss's by as much as Shakespeare's blank verse excels that of Schiller. This may or may not be; but the capabilities of the measure will not be understood until some fine poet — combining the simplicity of Longfellow and the vigor of Clough, and free from the sing-song of the one and the roughness of the other — shall make it the vehicle of passion, incident, imagination. To bring out its full rhythm, while depending chiefly on accent, — the natural basis of English verse, — the ear will pay regard to such effects of quantity as the language proffers. Purely quantitative English verse, at any length, is out of the equation. To the samples of it often printed by amateurs in "Blackwood" and elsewhere, Canning's outburst, "Dactyls call'st thou them? God help thee, silly one!" may be justly applied, but not to the hexameter of Kingsley and Bayard Taylor. Call the new measure what you will — something else, if possible, than the term applied to the verse of Homer and Lucretius, for it assuredly is not composed of quantitative dactyls and spondees. But it will have six feet,

and natural breaks and cæsuras, and will be more or less dactylic; it may also have anapestic variations, and trochees quite as often as spondees. To sum up all, its music, sweep, and inspiring effect will depend entirely upon the genius of the poet who writes it.

The use of this measure for translation from the Greek and Latin poets I have discussed in the chapter on Bryant. Longfellow could not be the supreme translator of Homer; but if there was nothing of the Grecian in him, there was much of the Latinist, and with Virgil's polished muse he might have been quite at ease. Meanwhile, the popularity of our new hexameter with simple readers who know little of the Homeric roll, the Sicilian *psithurisma*, or Virgil's liquid flow, has been demonstrated against all theorists by the record of "Evangeline." The poet's friends told him he must take a familiar metre, that hexameters "would never do." He found, as reported by David Macrae, that his "thoughts would run in hexameter," and declared that the measure would "take root in English soil." "It is a measure," he said, "that suits all themes. It can fly low like a swallow, and at any moment dart skyward. . . . What fine hexameters we have in the Bible: *Husbands, love your wives, and be not bitter against them*; and this line, *God is gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet*. Nothing could be grander than that!" Over-dactylic, and therefore monotonous, as Longfellow's hexameters often are, they have the merit of being smooth to read, without analysis, like any other English verse. This primary, easy lilt was needed for an introduction, until, stage by stage, the popular ear should be wonted to more varied forms, and the scholar brought to realize that here is a true and idiomatic English verse, however distinct from that which he learned in the classes.

See pp. 89-91.

Popular success of Longfellow's experiment.

Notwithstanding its primitive and loose construction, the verse of "Evangeline" is at times vigorously wrought and sonorous : —

"Wild through the dark colonnades and corridors leafy the blast rang,

Breaking the seal of silence, and giving tongues to the forest.
Soundless above them the banners of moss just stirred to the music.

Multitudinous echoes awoke and died in the distance,
Over the watery floor, and beneath the reverberant branches."

"*Evangeline*"
the flower
of American idyls.

And with the measure that came to him, the poet had chanced upon an idyllic story, seemingly made for its use, and wholly after his liking. A beautiful, pathetic tradition of American history, remote enough to gather a poetic halo, and yet fresh with sweet humanities ; tinged with provincial color which he knew and loved, and in its course taking on the changing atmospheres of his own land ; pastoral at first, then broken into action, and afterward the record of shifting scenes that made life a pilgrimage and dream. There are few dramatic episodes ; there is but one figure whom we follow, — that one the most touching of all, the betrothed Evangeline searching for her lover, through weary years and over half an unknown world. There are chance pictures of Acadian fields, New World rivers, prairies, bayous, forests, by moonlight and starlight and midday ; glimpses, too, of picturesque figures, artisans and farmers, soldiery, trappers, boatmen, emigrants and priests. But the poem already is a little classic, and will remain one, just as surely as "The Vicar of Wakefield," "The Deserted Village," or any other sweet and pious idyl of our English tongue ; yet we find its counterpart more nearly, I think, in some faultless miniature of the purest French school. Evangeline, as she

"Sat by some lonely grave, and thought that perchance in its bosom

He was already at rest, and she longed to slumber beside him,"

though the subject of artists, needs no other painter than her poet, through whose verse the music of her name and the legend of her wanderings will be long perpetuated. There are flaws and petty fancies and homely passages in "Evangeline"; but this one poem, thus far the flower of American idyls, known in all lands, I will not approach in a critical spirit. There are rooms in every house where one treads with softened footfall. Accept it as the poet left it, the mark of our advance at that time in the art of song,—his own favorite, of which he justly might be fond, since his people loved it with him, and him always for its sake.

The advantage of a new field, to which later authors, like Harte and Cable, are somewhat indebted, was of full service to our poet, not only on his provincial excursions, but also in the one successful attempt that has been made to treat in numbers the customs and legends of our Indian tribes. This gain was strengthened by the novelty of the rhymeless trochaic dimeter used for *Hiawatha*, a measure then practically unknown to English verse. He probably would not have ventured to compose his *Albic Edda* in this monotonous time-beat, had he not made sure of its effect in older literatures, and mainly, as was noted at the time, in the Finnish epic of "Kalevala." The result, on the whole, justified his course. "*Hiawatha*" is a forest-poem; it is fragrant with the woods, fresh with the sky and waters of the breezy north. The Indian traditions, like those of Finland, are the myths of an untutored race; they would seem puerile and affected in any but the most primitive of chant-

"*The Song of Hiawatha*," 1855.

Its measure.

First successful treatment of the Indian legends.

ing measures. As it is, one feels that the nicest skill was required to protect the verse from gathering an effect of burlesque or commonplace; yet this it never does. The fable is not of a stimulating kind. Grown-up readers, I suspect, seldom go through it consecutively. To read here and there and at odd times, it is in every way pleasurable. It was, in a sense, the poet's most genuine addition to our native literature. Previous endeavors to make imaginative verse from aboriginal material had signally failed: witness the ludicrous heroics of the Knickerbocker poets, whose conventional ideals were utterly discarded by Longfellow. He alone had the gift to blend the kindred myths of Indian fancy in mellow and artistic simplicity; to cull from Schoolcraft what was really essential, and make it more charming for us than a sheer invention possibly could be. He made the field his own, with little room for after-comers. "Hiawatha" is the one poem that beguiles the reader to see the birch and ash, the heron and eagle and deer, as they seem to the red man himself, and to join for the moment in his simple creed and wonderment. Such is the half-dramatic merit of the work, and it was only by a true exercise of the imagination that a poet, himself no familiar of the wild-wood life, could sit in his study and utilize the books relating to it: an equally true exercise, I think, though upon a less majestic basis, with that of the poet who mastered the Arthurian legends of his own historic race and island, and wrote the "Idylls of the King." Longfellow's use of the Indian dialect and names is delightful. These cantos remind us that poetry is the natural speech of primitive races; the "song" of Hiawatha has the epic quality that pertains to early ballads, the highest enjoyment of which belongs to later ages

and to the creature that Whitman terms the civilizee. He alone can relish to the full the illusions which the poet has recaptured for his episode of "The Building of the Canoe," the death of Minnehaha, and Hiawatha's mystical farewell.

When a companion-piece to "Evangeline" appeared, every one made haste to acquaint himself with the love experience of the demure Priscilla, loyal John Alden, and bluff Captain Miles. Even now, if we had some young Tennysons and Longfellows, poetic ideals might not wholly give way to the novelist's photographs of every-day life. The author's tact guided him to the prettiest tradition of Pilgrim times. We have a romantic picture of the Plymouth settlement, with its far-away round of human life and action, through which the tide of love went flowing then as now. The bucolic wedding-scene at the close is a fine subject for the pastoral canvas. *The Courtship of Miles Standish* was an advance upon "Evangeline," so far as concerns structure and the distinct characterization of personages. A merit of the tale is the frolicsome humor here and there, lighting up the gloom that blends with our conception of the Pilgrim inclosure, and we see that comic and poetic elements are not at odds in the scheme of a bright imagination. The verse, though stronger, is more labored than that of "Evangeline"; some of the lines are prosaic, almost inadmissible. There are worse, however, in the poet's last example of hexameter, the Quaker story of "Elizabeth," — which was written rather to fill out the "Tales of a Wayside Inn" than from any special inspiration. Nor does the Plymouth idyl show much sympathy on the part of the author with the ancestral environment, but chiefly a cavalier perception of what romance and grace there might have been in the good old colony time.

"*The Courtship of Miles Standish*,"
1858.

Longfellow's dramatic poems.

"The Spanish Student,"
1843.

Various weak and faulty dramas.

Cf. "Victorian"

His works in dramatic form plainly represent the craving of a versatile poet to win laurels in every province of his art. But to compose a living drama requires just that special faculty, if not the highest, which is denied to nine out of ten. Longfellow, perchance, might have made himself either a dramatist or a novelist, if he had gone into training as doggedly as others, born essayists or poets, who have gained the secret of novel-writing through practice, aided by popular encouragement. He made a fair beginning as a romancer with "Hyperion," and even as a dramatist by the clever play of *The Spanish Student*, — equipped with the properties of a country and literature so well understood by him. As a drama, that remains his best achievement. When the desire to better it possessed him, the outcome was a motley series of writings in the form under review: one, a frigid contribution to the pseudo-antique verse at which all college-bred poets feel competent to try their hands. Nothing with the true Grecian flavor could come out of his Italian and Gothic tendencies. *Pandora*, besides reminding us of Taylor's version of the Second Part of Faust, is in every way a forced effort, and, like "Judas Maccabæus," would go a-begging if the work of a new man. The Trilogy of *Christus*, as a whole, is a disjointed failure. Parts First and Third, "The Divine Tragedy," and "The New England Tragedies," exhibit the skill to choose imposing subjects and build a framework, but little of the power required for their treatment. We have the form, the personages, and situations, rarely the action and noble fire. The author's shortcomings are even more conspicuous than Tennyson's, and by as much as his in-

grew out of the fact that he could invent no other, and resulted in a barren paraphrase of what is fine in its own place. What sublime themes!—the life and passion of Christ, the Golden Legend of Christendom, the tragedy of Puritan superstition, — and how tamely the first and last of these are handled! Their consolidation was manifestly an after-thought, to give a semblance of strength to the whole. Where we have the poet's own style, as in the soliloquies of Mary, Simon, Helen, it is a subjective utterance of the Cambridge scholar at his desk. The Interludes are put in to brace the effect, like the sham buttresses of a faulty building. He should not have pre-empted the sable field of the Quaker and witch persecutions, unless he felt in his utmost fibre the nerve to occupy it. The temptation was strong; the result, contrasted with Hawthorne's prose treatment of kindred subjects, is deplorable.

The Golden Legend, however, should be judged by itself, and is an enchanting romance of the Middle Age cast in the dramatic mould. Brought out years before the "Tragedies," it finally was merged in the "Christus" by way of toning up the whole, the poet well knowing that this was his choicest distillation of Gothic mysticism and its legendary. It is composite rather than inventive; the correspondences between this work and Goethe's masterpiece, not to speak of productions earlier than either, are interesting. There is decided originality in its general effect, and in the taste wherewith the author, like a modern maker of stained glass, arranged the prismatic materials which he knew precisely where to collect. The Prologue, not wholly a new conception, is none the less imaginative: a scene of night and storm, with Lucifer and the Powers of the Air vainly assaulting the Strasburg Cross,

and see
"Becket"
in index
to this
volume.

"The
Golden
Legend,"
1851.

Delightful
re-use of
Gothic
material.

baffled by the voices of the Bells, which repeat the sacred words graven on their sides. The Legend is a striking instance of an effort by which mediæval rituals, chants, and wonder-tales are boldly seized and molten to an alloy, whose color and tensile qualities are due to the solvent of the alchemist. Here and there are unmistakable lustres of the poet's own vein. This would be recognized at sight : —

“ His gracious presence upon earth
Was as a fire upon a hearth ;
As pleasant songs, at morning sung,
The words that dropped from his sweet tongue
Strengthened our hearts.”

And this, also, is after his best fashion : —

“ I have my trials. Time has laid his hand
Upon my heart, gently, not smiting it,
But as a harper lays his open palm
Upon his harp, to deaden its vibrations.”

*The poet's
freest and
most ef-
fluent
work.*

The humor of Lucifer's soliloquies, in the Church and elsewhere, is characteristic of both Goethe and Longfellow, and therefore German with a difference. But all phases of our poet's verse and fancy are to be observed in this brilliant conglomerate. And what rare materials are brought together ! Here are revived the oft-told gest of Brother Felix, Walter the Minnesinger, Lucifer and the Black Paternoster, the monkish chants and anthems, the Miracle Play, the disputes at the School of Palermo. The richest passages are those contrasting the Cellar and Refectory scenes with the prayer-like labor of Brother Pacificus illuminating the Gospel in the Scriptorium above. These, with many beautiful counterparts, lighting page after page, move one to accord with those who regard “The Golden Legend” as a piece in which the poet's ver-

of a natural dramatist, it is vastly superior to the prosaic fabrics which are attached to it, and which fail to grow upon the reader in spite of this forced association.

A posthumous drama, *Michael Angelo*, while having the dignity that becomes its theme, does not change our view of the author's limitations. It contains elevated passages, mostly the soliloquies of the great artist, of whom in his old age it may be termed a sympathetic study, and is worth pursuing, even for something more than the perfect sonnet which forms the Dedication.

Were I to select one from the poet's long succession of books to fitly illustrate his traits, I might name the little volume of 1849, with its two divisions, "By the Seaside" and "By the Fireside." *The Building of the Ship* is the best example of his free-hand metrical style, — musical, wholesome, and suggestive of an imagination that takes heat from its own action. This celebration of a manly and poetic form of handicraft is simply cast, yet full of energy and spirit. At the close, a sunburst of patriotism, the superb apostrophe to the Union, outvies that ode of Horace on which it was modelled. In conception and structure the poem, while thoroughly national, is akin to Schiller's "Lay of the Bell." I think that the minor lyrics in this volume, from "Chrysaor" to "Gaspar Becerra," warrant my liking for it, and are peculiarly representative. The author long afterward supplied companion-pieces, *The Hanging of the Crane* and *Keramos*, to his idyl of the ship-yard. His reputation now made the production of each of these a literary event; just as any late and brief work of a favorite composer sends a murmur of interest through the musical world. Such afterpieces earn for artists, in the ripeness of their fame, a more

"*Michael Angelo*,"
1882.

A representative
volume:
"The
Seaside
and the
Fireside,"
1849.

*Free-hand
idyls.*

"*Tales
of a Wayside Inn*,"
1863-1874

Longfel-
low and
Morris.
Cp. "*Victorian
Poets*":
pp. 372-
373.

sudden reward than greater efforts which preceded them. All things come around at last, and often come too late. But Longfellow again and again received his crown of praise; and this the more frequently in return for service in which he was easily first, — the art which gained for an old-time minstrel a willing largess, that of the raconteur, the teller of bewitching tales. His station as a poet was not advanced by the different instalments of the *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, but it was much to have the delight of giving delight, as often as each appeared, to a host of unseen readers. And so in the end they formed his most extended work: a series of short stories, mostly gathered from older literatures, translated into his varying and crystalline verse, and linked together, like the tales of Boccaccio and Chaucer, by a running commentary of the poet's own. The selections are good of themselves, and the conceit of the gathering of the poet's friends at the Sudbury Inn brought them near to the interest of his audience. Nothing could be better than the prelude. A transfiguring portraiture from life is that of the musician, Ole Bull. The tales here told in song for the first time, all of them colonial, are but four in number, — few indeed, among so many gleaned from the Decameron, the *Gesta Romanorum*, "the chronicles of Charlemagne," and "the stories that recorded are by Pierre Alphonse." Here is the semblance of a master effort, but in fact a succession of minor ones; we perceive that no great outlay of imaginative force was required for this kind of work. With Longfellow's lyrical facility of putting a story into rippling verse, almost as lightly as another would tell it in prose, we find ourselves assured of as many poems as he had themes. Less subtle and refined than Morris, he was a better raconteur. This was due to a modern

and natural style, the sweet variety of his measures, and to his ease in dialogue. He intersperses many realistic passages, and by other ways avoids the monotony of the "idle singer of an empty day." As for poetic atmosphere and all the essentials of a select work of beauty, the "Tales" cannot enter into comparison with "The Earthly Paradise." Longfellow's frequent gayety and constant sense of the humanities make him a true story-teller for the multitude; not, like Morris, an exquisite, dreamy singer for companions of his own guild.

His version of *The Divine Comedy* is one of the most signal results of American labor in the department of translation. There was nothing in the work of his predecessors to prevent the task from being not only a matter of attraction, but a duty; no one, on the score of talent or acquirements, was better fitted to renew an attempt which from its conditions never can be perfectly successful. His life-long study of Dante's text had brought to this natural translator that knowledge of it which was more than half the achievement. The theory of his version was the modern one (which it helped to confirm),—that of recent and noted English translations, and of Taylor's "Faust,"—to wit, a literal and lineal rendering. Unlike Taylor, Longfellow had but one measure to reproduce, and he discarded the rhymes altogether, while striving to convey the rhythm and deeper music of the sublime original. It was fitting that the neighborhood of Cambridge, whose poets and scholars were for the most part sympathetic lovers of Dante, should furnish a new translation of the *Commedia*, and that Longfellow—less brilliant than Lowell, whether as a poet or a student, but his superior in patient industry and evenness of taste—should be the one to make

Translation:
"Dante's
Divine Comedy,"
1865-1867.

*Theory of
the work.*

Competitors in the field.

it. We are told that his work received, from time to time, the criticism of a pleiad of his friends. Certainly it was brought to birth with heralding by Norton, — the classical translator of “Vita Nuova,” — Howells, Greene, and others of the group. As for the discussions which ensued upon its merits, my impression is that points were well taken on both sides. Various other translations of Dante were appearing about this time — the six-hundredth anniversary of the Tuscan’s birth: in Great Britain, those of Dayman, Ford, and Rossetti; in America, Dr. Parsons’s “Inferno” was before the public, — seventeen cantos in the rhymed pentameter quatrain, not so literal as Longfellow’s, but the noble performance that one might expect from the author of the “Lines on a Bust of Dante.” The best of the English triad was that of Rossetti. It bears the stamp of a master-hand, yet has so many blemishes, and is here and there so awkward, as to be on the whole less satisfactory than Longfellow’s, to which it is kindred in principle and method.

Merits of Longfellow’s version.

The reader of Longfellow’s pages is secure of a faithful reproduction of the original order and meaning and of Dante’s manner — so far as the latter depends on linear arrangement. All these are of the highest value, if the vital and pervading style of the lofty Florentine can likewise be transferred. The ideal translator will reproduce all these — the sense, the metrical arrangement, the grandeur of tone. Until his arrival, if one of these must be sacrificed, it cannot be the first, and it should be, I think, the second rather than the third. One would prefer a prose rendering of the same rank with Mr. Lang’s “Homer” and “Theocritus” to a feebly correct transcription in English verse. Longfellow certainly aimed to

meet all the foregoing requirements, and in his case a complete failure was scarcely possible, even with respect to the third. But his gifts as a translator never were more conspicuous than when, in youth, he paraphrased and almost recreated so many lyrics from the German and other tongues. Applying a literal method to the *Commedia*, his genius is less evident than his talent and conscientious self-restraint. What he did was to translate the whole work, line for line, almost as literally as a class recitation, and this, barring a few archaisms, with much simplicity and smoothness. Except in the more abstruse cantos, the appearance of ease is so marked that one gives credit to the story that the poet, with his facility and mastery of the text, accomplished his task in a few years by writing a stated number of verses each morning, while waiting for his coffee to boil. If this were the fact, it would not do to estimate the feat by it. Where a man's genius lies, there he works with ease, and often undervalues the result; elsewhere, he "labors." There is nothing labored in Longfellow's translation; the fault is of another kind: we lose, amid all its simplicity, the "grand manner," as Mr. Arnold would call it, of the divine master. A neophyte misses what he expected to realize of the unflinching strength and terror of the *Inferno*, the palpitating splendor of the *Paradiso*. The three divisions seem levelled, so to speak, to the grade of the *Purgatorio*, midway between the zenith and nadir of Dante's song. This shortcoming is to be felt, rather than proved, and tells in favor of Parsons's translation, and of others greatly inferior to this as a whole. Even Cary's old-fashioned paraphrase, full of Miltonic inversions and epithets, and thoroughly open to Bentley's stricture on Pope's "Homer," has exalted passages that jus-

*Special
character-
istics and
defects.*

*Faulty use
of deriva-
tives.*

tify its survival to our day. Longfellow's genuine scholarship led him to pursue his method, once determined on, without the slightest protrusion of skill and learning. Grace is added by the frequent use of feminine endings,—a habit natural to Longfellow, and increasing the likeness of his own to the original verse. But his rendition of many Italian words by English derivatives, which often have quite lost the etymological meaning, is an error made in the interest of extreme fidelity and really telling against it. A kindred one is the use of derivatives in which the primitive meaning is not lost, but which do not translate the text to English ears so effectively as their Saxon synonyms. For instance, most of the translators — Wright, Cayley, Ford, Rossetti, etc. — have made havoc with the inscription over the gate of hell:—

“Per me si va nella città dolente;
Per me si va nell' eterno dolore;
Per me si va tra la perduta gente.”

Longfellow's rendering is superior to all the rest:—

“Through me the way is to the city dolent;
Through me the way is to eternal dole;
Through me the way among the people lost.”

Yet here is a forced translation of the word “dolente” by a derivative which, to English readers, is not an *equivalent*. Besides, a more effective expression of anguish can be gained by the use of a Saxon word. One step further would have made Mr. Longfellow's rendering perfect: he might have escaped an inversion, and have matched the verbal repetition in the first two lines, after this wise:—

“Through me the way is to the woful city;
Through me the way is to eternal woe.”

Reading the whole work, and accepting the late Mr. Greene's opinion that the characteristics of Dante are Variety and Power, I think that the evenness of Longfellow's method robs us of the former ; and as for the latter, it is the one thing which the lay reader of this translation, unrivalled as it is in many respects, does not adequately feel.

The reflex influence of this effort was apparent in the elevated nature of his later poems. It is true that he occasionally used his new diction in a prosaic or weary manner. Of this, such a line as "The spiritual world preponderates," from the sonnet to Whittier, is an extreme instance. Otherwise, a firmer poetic quality was observable after this date. The sonnets which he now wrote, few as they are, entitle him to a place in the most select circle of modern poets. They rank with the best written in our century. Where, in fact, throughout the whole galaxy of English sonnets, is there a group surpassing the six which accompanied the Dante volumes? Rhythmic, perfect in structure, and full of beauty, they have captured the spirit of the Divine Song. A series written in the poet's old age, his tributes to the memory of comrades gone before, has a pathetic charm. Still later was composed the sonnet "Nature," which must be accounted one of the choicest in any language upon the theme to which its title is but a pass-word : —

Later work.

Sonnets of rare beauty.

"As a fond mother, when the day is o'er,
 Leads by the hand her little child to bed,
 Half willing, half reluctant to be led
 And leave his broken playthings on the floor,
 Still gazing at them through the open door,
 Nor wholly reassured and comforted
 By promises of others in their stead,
 Which, though more splendid, may not please him more ;
 So Nature deals with us, and takes away

Our playthings one by one, and by the hand
 Leads us to rest so gently, that we go
 Scarce knowing if we wish to go or stay,
 Being too full of sleep to understand
 How far the unknown transcends the what we know."

"*Ultima
 Thule*,"
 1880.

This is, however, singularly like the translation, by Leigh Hunt, of Filicaja's sonnet on Providence, quoted by Longfellow himself in the notes to the *Paradiso*. With lessening use, the poet's touch lost little of its delicacy and poise. The few pieces brought together in *Ultima Thule* indicate that his ruling sense of art was clear as ever; nor was it finally dulled, like Emerson's bright intelligence, by a veil of darkness slowly drawn. He ceased from service almost without forewarning, and because his work was done.

V.

Longfellow's
 habits and
 manner-
 ism.

FEW poets have been more restricted to fixed habits of composition. His mode was perfectly obvious and unchanged, save by greater refinement, during fifty years. Everything suggested an image, except when his imagery suggested the thought of which he made it seem a reflection. He tells us that

"Bent like a laboring oar that toils in the surf of the ocean,
 Bent, but not broken, by age was the form of the notary public";

and we feel that the image really grew out of a poet's conception of his personage. But again, looking upon "drifting currents of the river," or finding the day "cold and dark and dreary," or listening to the belfry-chimes, he hunts about for some emotion or phase of life which these things aptly illustrate. This process not seldom becomes a vice of style. He consistently applied his imagery in a formal way — the very

Formal
 Imagery

teenth century. But whether his metaphors came of themselves, or with prayer and fasting, they always came, and often were novel and poetic. A more trying habit was that inbred, as it seems, with the New England poets, most of whom have preached too much in verse. He tacked a didactic moral, like a corollary of Euclid, on many a lovely poem. No one better knew that "nothing is poetry which could as well have been expressed in prose," but the habit formed in youth seemed beyond his control. Still, it was through this habit that he became the most popular of University poets, and as a moralist no one could make commonplace more attractive. Lastly, the bookish flavor of his work is at once its strength and weakness: the former, because the very life of his genius depended on it; the latter, because poetry that is over-literary is so much the less creative, and is otherwise open to the objections brought against literary art. Brown-ing's fondness for black-letter is redeemed by dramatic vigor. In reading Longfellow, we see that the world of books was to him the real world. From first to last, if he had been banished from his library, his imagination would have been blind and deaf and silent. It is true that he fed upon the choicest yield of literature; his gathered honey was of the thyme and clover, not the rude buckwheat. Take, for instance, the "Morituri Salutamus," read before his surviving classmates on the fiftieth anniversary of their graduation. Was there ever anything more beautiful, in view of the occasion? Is not the title itself a stroke of genius? But the title also defines the method of the poem: there are more than twenty learned references in this piece of less than three hundred lines, including one entire tale from the "Gesta Romanorum." He had, we see, this way of working, and for once it resulted in a poem that is the model of its kind.

Moralizing.

Excessive literary flavor.

"*Moriturus Salutamus*,"
1875.

*A poet of
the study
and alcove,*

As for Nature, he usually saw it as polarized by reflection from the mirror Art. Whether in or out of his study, he had not Emerson's interpretative eye, and his report of landscape and the country life was less genuine than Lowell's or Whittier's, not to mention the younger poets. He rarely ventured beyond the simple outlook from his mansion door. The effect of the rain, the mist, the night-fall, upon his own spirit, is what he gives us, in the manner of some landscape of the French subjective school. A starry event, the occultation of Orion, at once becomes a glorious image of the triumph of Love over Force. In "Evangeline" there are refined pictures of scenery that was familiar to him, with just as pleasing descriptions of that which he knew only through his books. He painted the landscape of half Europe in the same way, always a cosmopolitan, never the genius of the place. The flower-de-luce, with its heraldic associations, is the emblem after which he names a volume. But with respect to still life and common life, the true *genre* touch of "The Old Clock" and "The Village Blacksmith" grows firmer in "Miles Standish," where he draws so well the Plymouth interiors, the Puritan maiden at her wheel, the elders, and men-at-arms. And look! how he describes what of all is nearest his heart, an olden volume:—

"Open wide on her lap lay the well-worn psalm-book of Ainsworth,

Printed in Amsterdam, the words and the music together,
Rough-hewn, angular notes, like stones in the walls of a churchyard,

Darkened and overhung by the running vine of the verses.
Such was the book from whose pages she sang the old Puritan anthem."

I more than half recant the statement that Long-

fellow was not a poet of Nature, bethinking myself how justly others have maintained that he was by eminence our poet of the Sea. He clung to the coast: looking inland, he cared most for the tide-meadows of his neighborhood; looking oceanward, his fancy throve upon the omens, the mysteries, the perpetual fascinations of "sea from shore." He loved his mighty rock-girt bay, the lights and beacons, the mist and fog-bells, the sleet and surge of winter, the coastwise vessels; and its memories were the drift-wood with which he kindled "thoughts that burned and glowed within." His imagination goes out to "the ocean old," the "gray old sea" of storms and calms; to its winged frequenters, the ancient galleons, the fleets of conquest and embassy and traffic. The names of sunny isles and far-off lands were music to him. If by chance our fireside magician drowned his books deeper than did ever plummet sound, and sang from a poet's heart alone, it was when he returned again and again to capture and repeat for us the haunting "secret of the sea."

*Yet one
who
caught the
secret of
the Sea.*

Reviewing our survey of his work, I observe that each of his best known efforts has led to the mention of prose or verse by some other hand which it resembles. In view of the possible inference, we now may ask, Was Longfellow, then, with his great reputation and indisputable hold upon our affections, not an original poet? It must be acknowledged, at the outset, that few poets of his standing have profited more openly by examples that suited their taste and purpose. The evidence of this is seen not in merely three or four, but in a great number of his productions,—in his briefest lyrics, in his elaborate narrative poems. Like greater bards before him, he was a good borrower. Dependence on his equipment led to unconscious as-

*Question
of his
origi-
nality.*

*A persist-
ent bor-
rower, but*

*With a
distinctive
air.*

simulation of its treasures. But originality is of more than one kind. As we say of some people that they have a genius for friendship, so his sympathy with the beautiful, wherever he found it, was unique and tantamount to a special inspiration. The proof of his originality, however, even where he was least inventive, hardly requires this paradox: it did not consist in word or motive, but in the distinctive tone of the singer, the sentiment of voice which made his performances in a sense new songs; in an air, a suffused quality, which rendered every phrase unmistakable. If he borrowed freely, he was freely drawn upon by others in their turn. Scores of followers have caught a manner that shows to poor advantage when transferred; but his position for years, at the head of even a sentimental school, indicated that Longfellow was not without a genius of his own.

*His cosmo-
politan-
ism,*

Apart from certain exceptions already noted, his bent was cosmopolitan. He had the Anglo-Saxon longing of the pine for the palm, a love for the softer winds and skies, the pliant languages, of Italy and Spain. Besides the example of his works, we have his written theory of what our literature should be. His Mr. Churchill, in "Kavanagh," declares that in literature "Nationality is a good thing to a certain extent, but universality is better. All that is best in the great poets of all countries is not what is national in them, but what is universal. Their roots are in their native soil; but their branches wave in the unpatriotic air that speaks the same language unto all men. . . . I prefer what is natural. Mere nationality is often ridiculous." And again, "Our literature is not an imitation, but a continuation of the English." He insists upon originality, but "without spasms and convulsions." . . . "A national literature is not the growth of a day.

*And ideal
of a na-
tional lit-
erature.
See pp. 5-
10, 96, 97.*

Centuries must contribute their dew and sunshine to it. . . . As for having it so savage and wild as you want it, . . . all literature, as well as all art, is the result of culture and intellectual refinement. . . . As the blood of all nations is mingling with our own, so will their thoughts and feelings finally mingle in our literature. We shall draw from the Germans tenderness, from the Spanish passion, from the French vivacity, to mingle more and more with our English solid sense. And this will give us universality, so much to be desired." With regard to all this, it may be said that Longfellow's service, important as it was in his time, is not that required of his successors. The greatest poets have been those who conveyed the spirit of their respective nationalities. That poetry is truest which is universal in its passion and thought, but national in motive and in all properties of the craft. The final outcome of American ideality will depend on conditions which our best thinkers are investigating, and which give rise to conflicting theories. Herbert Spencer's recent utterance is somewhat in accordance with Longfellow's views: "Because of its size, and the heterogeneity of its components, the American nation will be a long time in evolving its ultimate form, but its ultimate form will be high." And again: "From biological truths it is to be inferred that the eventual mixture of the allied varieties of the Aryan race forming the population will produce a finer type of man than has hitherto existed." This agreeable prediction may seem too optimistic; but the future type of poetry certainly will represent the future type of man. Without debating the question whether we now are forming loam for a distinct growth, or whether our literature is to be a "continuation" merely, we may be sure that both here and in foreign lands new

"Herbert
Spencer on
the Amer-
icans."
New
York,
1882.

Longfellow a pioneer of taste.

types of genius will appear, we know not how or why, and add new species to the world's *flora symbolica* of art and song. Longfellow, if not a prophet, was a pioneer, — by choice an apostle of the best traditional culture. His verse is not of a kind to make its admirers indifferent to any other, — an effect, whether for good or ill, sometimes produced by Browning's, Emerson's, and Whitman's, — but that which, however elementary, promotes a taste for higher ideals. It is due to such as he that we have passed the age of nursing, and are now less satisfied with what is not primarily our own. That the best equipped section of the country should produce him was in the order of events: other things being equal, that region is most American which has been so the longest, and the frontier steadily grows to resemble it.

In what sense a "poet of the middle classes."

In England, Longfellow has been styled the poet of the middle classes. Those classes include, however, the majority of intelligent readers, and Tennyson had an equal share of their favor. The English middle classes furnish an analogue to the one great class of American readers, among whom our poet's success was so evident. This was because he used his culture not to veil the word, but to make it clear. He drew upon it for the people in a manner which they could relish and comprehend. Would not any poet whose work might lack the subtlety that commends itself to professional readers be relegated by University critics to the middle-class wards? Caste and literary priesthood have something to do with this. Were it not for "Lucretius" and "In Memoriam," the author of "The May Queen" and "Locksley Hall" and "Enoch Arden" would be in the same category; as it is, he scarcely escapes it in the judgment of both the psychologic and neo-Romantic schools. Yet the

Tennyson.

poetry of analytics has not outlasted, in the past, that which came without gloss or obscurity, and whose melody and meaning appealed to one and all. That a poet's verse should require a commentary in its own day is not, all things considered, the best omen for its hold upon the future. But the point taken with respect to Longfellow is not unjust. So far as comfort, virtue, domestic tenderness, and freedom from extremes of passion and incident are characteristics of the middle classes, he has been their minstrel. And it is true that a cold, or even temperate quality is deadening to the higher forms of art. The creative soul abhors ennui; it glows in dramatic self-abandonment. Poets "of passion and of pain" concentrate their lives in some burning focus whose dazzling heat devours them; they suffer, but mount on their own flame. Without passion and its expiations, without the mad waste of life, and even crime and terror, where are our noble tragedies, our high dramatic themes? The compensation of man's anguish is that it lifts him beyond the ordinary. Superlative joy and woe alike were foreign to the verse of Longfellow. It came neither from the heights nor out of the depths, but along the even tenor of a fortunate life. I do not mean that he was exempt from mortal ills; he had his dark experiences, but at the mature age that has learned "what life and death is," and of them he gave little sign. If sorrow and rapture are from within, rather than from without, it may be that our benignant poet, alike through circumstance and temperament, was spared the full extremity of discipline signified in the translation from Goethe:—

"Who ne'er his bread in sorrow ate,
 Who ne'er the mournful midnight hours
 Weeping upon his bed has sate,
 He knows you not, ye Heavenly Powers."

*Poets and
 their schol-
 iasts.*

*Longfel-
 low's ethics
 and do-
 mesticity.*

*Wanting
 in ecstasy
 and dra-
 matic in-
 sight.*

*Fortune's
favorites.*

Not his the agony and bloody sweat. We may conjecture that, aside from one or two fierce episodes, he was less tried in the furnace than poets are wont to be. From the first he had what he desired, — congenial work and associations, advancement, the love of women and friends, appreciative criticism, the pure wheat and sweet waters of life in plenitude. He had lovely things about him, and gratified his artist nature to the full, while so many makers of the beautiful are condemned to Vulcan's cavern of toil and smoke. He had the best, as by right ; and in truth the world, if it but knew it, can afford to keep a poet or an artist in some luxury, like a flower for its perfume, a hound for beauty, a bird for song. If Longfellow's regard fell upon ugliness and misery, it certainly did not linger there. "The cry of the human" did not haunt his ear. When he avails himself of a piteous situation, he does so as tranquilly as the nuns who broi-der on tapestry the torments of the doomed in hell. He wrote few love poems, none full of longing, or "wild with all regret" ; but this might come from the absolute content of his soul, — he had gained the woman whom he idolized, and songs of passion are the cry of unfulfilled desire. His song flows on an equal course, from sunny fountain-head to darkling sea ; and even upon that sea he finds repose, for its billows rock to sleep, and no cradle is more peaceful than the grave. Thus fair, gentle, fortunate, — could such a poet answer to the deepest needs of men? Allowing for the factor of imagination, we still see that Longfellow shrank from efforts that would react too keenly upon his sensibilities. He touched the average heart by the sympathetic quality of a voice adjusted to the natural scale. People above or apart from the average — sufferers, aspirants, questioners —

*A sym-
pathetic
voice, un-
perturbed
by human
passion
and con-
flict.*

are irked by his acceptance of life as it is and his enjoyable relations to it. There is something exasperating to serious minds in his placid waiver of things grievous or distasteful. They ask what cause he has advanced, how has he enlarged the province of thought, what conflict has he sung? Where are his rapture, his longing, his infinitudes? They see his fellow-poet, less prosperous and accomplished, who defied obloquy, and rose to passion in denouncing wrong, — a man of peace, yet valiant as Great-Heart in behalf of freedom and the rights of man. They recall another, who sought out the inmost laws of spiritual life. But why expect a poet to be other than he is? Recognize the instinct that defined his range, and value the range at its worth. Longfellow spoke according to his voice and vision. The attempt to do otherwise ends all. A critic must accept what is best in a poet, and thus become his best encourager.

So far as good fortune may be supplemented by human wisdom, Longfellow was a man after the preacher's own heart. His was one of those happy natures which, as Thackeray says, are softened by prosperity and kindness. He was saved the torment that the envious feel : —

"He did not find his sleep less sweet
For music in some neighboring street ;
Nor rustling hear in every breeze
The laurels of Miltiades."

We have seen his tact in the choice and use of things pertaining to his work, his carefully restrained decoration, his knowledge of limitations, which prevented him, except in the dramatic experiments, from groping for impracticable means and results. The forms which he introduced or revived were as successful as Tennyson's; in fact, his product represents

*The poet's
sweet and
wholesome
disposition.*

*Artistic
tact.*

*Judgment
supple-
menting
inspira-
tion.*

*Final
estimate.*

*H. W. L.
died at
Cam-
bridge,
Mass.,
Mar. 24,
1882.*

the full advance of American taste and feeling, during the period covered by it, though not our most significant thought. He was a lyrical artist, whose taste outranked his inspiration; and assuredly, if he had been a Minister of the Fine Arts, he never would have abolished an École at the dictation of the "impressionists," nor have adopted as a motto the phrase "Beware of the Beautiful." We have noted his industry and the self-control with which he devoted his life to poetry alone. Yet the report of his library talk shows that his brain was alert upon many topics; that in private, at least, he did not reserve his talents for his publisher, — an economy which a French critic declares to be "a bad sign, and the proof that one makes a trade of literature, and that one does not really have the impressions he assumes to have in his books." His verse is peculiarly open to the test of Milton's requirement, that poetry should be simple, sensuous, passionate. Simple, even elementary, it manifestly is, despite the learning which he put to use. It is sensuous in much that charms the ear and eye, and in little else; for the extreme of sensuousness is deeply felt, and feeling results in passion, and passionate the verse of Longfellow was not, nor ever could be. His song was a household service, the ritual of our feastings and mournings; and often it rehearsed for us the tales of many lands, or, best of all, the legends of our own. I see him, a silver-haired minstrel, touching melodious keys, playing and singing in the twilight, within sound of the rothe of the sea. There he lingers late; the curfew bell has tolled and the darkness closes round, till at last that tender voice is silent, and he softly moves unto his rest.



Edward A. Poe

idealized as time goes by. The critic's first labor often is the task of distinguishing between men, as history and their works display them, and the ideals which one and another have conspired to urge upon his acceptance.

*A twofold
ideal.*

The difficulty is increased when, as in the case of Poe, a twofold ideal exists, of whose opposite sides many that have written upon him seem to observe but one. In the opinion of some people, even now, his life was not only pitiful, but odious, and his writings are false and insincere. They speak of his morbid genius, his unjust criticisms, his weakness and ingratitude, and scarcely can endure the mention of his name. Others recount his history as that of a sensitive, gifted being, most sorely beset and envired, who was tried beyond his strength and prematurely yielded, but still uttered not a few undying strains. As a new generation has arisen, and those of his own who knew him are passing away, the latter class of his reviewers seems to outnumber the former. A chorus of indiscriminate praise has grown so loud as really to be an ill omen for his fame; yet, on the whole, the wisest modern estimate of his character and writings has not lessened the interest long ago felt in them at home and abroad.

Postulates.

It seems to me that two things at least are certain. First, and although his life has been the subject of the research which is awarded only to strange and suggestive careers, he was, after all, a man of like passions with ourselves, — one who, if weaker in his weaknesses than many, and stronger in his strength, may not have been so bad, nor yet so good, as one and another have painted him. Thousands have gone as far toward both extremes, and the world never has heard of them. Only the gift of genius has made the

temperament of Poe a common theme. And thus, I also think, we are sure, in once more calling up his shade, that we invoke the manes of a poet. Of his right to this much-abused title there can be little dispute, nor of the claim that, whatever he lacked in compass, he was unique among his fellows, — so different from any other writer that America has produced as really to stand alone. He must have had genius to furnish even the basis for an ideal which excites this persistent interest. Yes, we are on firm ground with relation to his genuineness as a poet. But his narrowness of range, and the slender body of his poetic remains, of themselves should make writers hesitate to pronounce him our greatest one. His verse is as conspicuous for what it shows he could not do as for that which he did. He is another of those poets, outside the New England school, of whom each has made his mark in a separate way, — among them all, none more decisively than Poe. So far as the judgment of a few rare spirits in foreign lands may be counted the verdict of "posterity," an estimate of him is not to be lightly and flippantly made. Nor is it long since a group of his contemporaries and successors, in his own country, spoke of him as a poet whose works are a lasting monument, and of his "imperishable" fame.

*Unique
quality of
Poe's gen-
ius.*

After every allowance, it seems difficult for one not utterly jaded to read his poetry and tales without yielding to their original and haunting spell. Even as we drive out of mind the popular conceptions of his nature, and look only at the portraits of him in the flesh, we needs must pause and contemplate, thoughtfully and with renewed feeling, one of the marked ideal faces that seem—like those of Byron, De Musset, Heine — to fulfil all the traditions of

*Personal
aspect.*

genius, of picturesqueness, of literary and romantic effect.

*Halpin's
likeness of
Poe, in the
complete
American
edition.*

Halpin's engraving of Poe, in which the draughtsman was no servile copyist, but strove to express the sitter at his best, makes it possible to recall the poet delineated by those who knew and admired him in his nobler seasons. We see one they describe as slight but erect of figure, athletic and well moulded, of middle height, but so proportioned as to seem every inch a man ; his head finely modelled, with a forehead and temples large and not unlike those of Bonaparte ; his hands fair as a woman's, — in all, a graceful, well-dressed gentleman, — one, even in the garb of poverty, “with gentleman written all over him.” We see the handsome, intellectual face, the dark and clustering hair, the clear and sad gray-violet eyes, — large, lustrous, glowing with expression, — the mouth, whose smile at least was sweet and winning. We imagine the soft, musical voice (a delicate thing in man or woman), the easy, quiet movement, the bearing that no failure could humble. And this man had not only the gift of beauty, but the passionate love of beauty, — either of which may be as great a blessing or peril as can befall a human being stretched upon the rack of this tough world.

*Later
portraits.*

But look at some daguerreotype taken shortly before his death, and it is like an inauspicious mirror, that shows all too clearly the ravage made by a vexed spirit within, and loses the qualities which only a living artist could feel and capture. Here is the dramatic, defiant bearing, but with it the bitterness of scorn. The disdain of an habitual sneer has found an abode on the mouth, yet scarcely can hide the tremor of irresolution. In Bendann's likeness, indubitably faithful, we find those hardened lines of the

*Repro-
duced
in the*

chin and neck that are often visible in men who have gambled heavily, which Poe did not in his mature years, or who have lived loosely and slept ill. The face tells of battling, of conquering external enemies, of many a defeat when the man was at war with his meaner self.

Among the pen-portraits of Poe, at his best and his worst, none seem more striking in their juxtaposition, none less affected by friendship or hatred, than those left to us by C. F. Briggs, the poet's early associate. These were made but a short time before the writer's death, — after the lapse of years had softened the prejudices of a man prejudiced indeed, yet of a kindly heart, and had rendered the critical habit of the journalist almost a rule of action.

If these external aspects were the signs of character within, we can understand why those who saw them should have believed of Poe — and in a different sense than of Hawthorne — that

"Two natures in him strove
Like day with night, his sunshine and his gloom."

The recorded facts of his life serve to enhance this feeling. My object here is not biography, yet let us note the brief annals of a wayward, time-tossed critic, romancer, poet. Their purport and outline, seen through a cloud of obscurities, and the veil thrown over them by his own love of mystery and retreat, — made out from the various narratives of those who have contended in zeal to discover the minute affairs of this uncommon man, — the substance of them all, I say, may readily enough be told.

"Memo-
rial Vol-
ume,"
Balt., 1877.

Reprinted
in the New
York "In-
depen-
dent,"
June 24,
1880.

II.

*Edgar Allan Poe:
born in
Boston,
January
19, 1809.*

His childhood.

THE law of chance, that has so much to do with the composition of a man, that makes no two alike, yet adjusts the most of us to a common average, brings about exceptional unions like the one from which the poet sprang. A well-born, dissolute Maryland boy, with a passion for the stage, marries an actress and adopts her profession, — taking up a life that was strolling, precarious, half-despised in the pioneer times. Three children were the fruit of this love-match. The second, Edgar, was born in Boston, January 19, 1809. From his father he inherited Italian, French, and Irish blood; the Celtic pride of disposition and certain weaknesses that were his bane. His mother, Elizabeth Arnold, an actress of some talent, was as purely English as her name. Two years after his birth, the hapless parents, wearied and destitute, died at Richmond, both in the same week. The orphans "found kind friends," and were adopted — the oldest, William, by his grandfather Poe, of Baltimore; Edgar and Rosalie by citizens of Richmond. Edgar gained a protector in Mr. Allan, an English-born and wealthy merchant, who was married, but without a child. The boy's beauty and precocity won the heart of this gentleman, who gave him his name, and lavished upon him, in true Southern style, all that perilous endearment which befits the son and heir of a generous house. Servants, horses, dogs, the finest clothes, a purse well filled, all these were at his disposal from the outset. Great pains were taken with his education, the one element of moral discipline seemingly excepted. When eight years old he went with Mr. Allan to England, and was at the school in Stoke-Newington, to which it is thought his

memory went back in after years, when he wrote the tale of "William Wilson." At ten we find him at school in Richmond, proficient in classical studies but shirking his mathematics, already writing verse,—instinctively

"Seeking with hand and heart
The teacher whom he learned to love
Before he knew 't was Art."

His grace and strength, his free, romantic, and ardent bearing, made him friends among old and young, and at this time he certainly was capable of the most passionate loyalty to those he loved. Traditions of all this—of his dreamy, fitful temperament, of his early sorrows and his midnight mournings over the grave of an affectionate woman who had been his paragon—are carefully preserved. He was a school-boy, here and there, until 1826, when he passed a winter at the University of Virginia. He ended his brief course in the school of ancient and modern languages with a successful examination, but after much dissipation and gambling which deeply involved him in debt. His thoughtlessness and practical ingratitude justly incensed an unwise but hitherto devoted guardian. A rupture followed between the two, Mr. Allan finally refusing to countenance Edgar's extravagances; and the young man betook himself to Boston, where, after a few months, he succeeded in finding a printer for his first little book, a revised collection of juvenile poems. But he was soon reduced to straits, and driven to enlistment, under a partly fictitious name, as a soldier; in which capacity, first a private and then by promotion a sergeant-major, he served his country for almost two years. In 1829 he was touched by news of the death of Mrs. Allan, who had always given him a sympathetic mother's

Training.

*College
life.*

*"Tamerlane and
Other
Poems,"
Boston,
1827. Re-
printed,
with
changes
and omis-
sions,
Baltimore,
1829.
Enlistment
in the
army.*

"*Edgar
Allan
Poe.*" By
G. E.
Wood-
berry:
Boston,
1885.

*West
Point.*

*Subscrip-
tion edition
of his
poems:
New
York,
1831.*

love. He obtained a furlough, and effected a reconciliation with the widower in his hour of loneliness and sorrow. Poe's later and trustworthy biographer has spared no pains to give the true details of the youth's enlistment, service, and final discharge through the influence of his early protector.

About this time he visited his aunt, Mrs. Maria Clemm, of Baltimore. Her daughter Virginia was then six years old, and Poe interested himself in the sweet and gentle child, who loved him from the first, and made his will her law through girlhood and their subsequent wedded life.

Poe now was asked to choose a profession; he selected that of arms, and his benefactor secured his admission to West Point. Here we find him in 1830, and find little good of him. Though now a man grown, he was unable to endure discipline. After a first success, he tired of the place and brought about his own expulsion and disgrace, to his patron's deep, and this time lasting, resentment. But here he also arranged for the issue, by subscription, of another edition of his poems, which was delivered to his classmates after his departure from the academy.

A new personage now comes upon the scene. Mr. Allan, naturally desiring affection from some quarter, married again, and after a time heirs were born to the estate which Poe, had he been less reckless, might have inherited. The poet, returning in disgrace to Richmond, found no intercessor in the home of his youth. This change, and his manner of life thus far, render it needless to look for other causes of the final rupture between himself and his guardian. It was the just avenger of fate for his persistent folly, and a defeat was inevitable in his contest (if there was a contest) with a lady who, by every law of right, was

stronger than he. Poe went out into the world with full permission to have the one treasure he had seemed to value — his own way. Like a multitude of American youths, often the sons or grandsons of successful men, he found himself of age, without the means proportionate to the education, habits, and needs of a gentleman, and literally, in the place of an unfailing income, without a cent. Better off than many who have erred less, he had one strong ally — his pen. With this he was henceforth to earn his own bed and board, and lead the arduous life of a working man of letters.

Adrift.

His one ally.

For the struggle now begun his resources of tact, good sense, self-poise, were as deficient as his intellectual equipment was great. Soon after the loss of a home-right, which he forfeited more recklessly than Esau, his professional career may be said to have begun. It extended, with brief but frequent intermissions, from 1832 to 1849, the year of his untimely death. Its first noteworthy event was the celebrated introduction to Kennedy, Latrobe, and Miller, through his success in winning a literary prize with "A MS. Found in a Bottle." This brought him friends, work, and local reputation, — in all, a fair and well-earned start.

A good start.

Seventeen years, thenceforward, of working life, in which no other American writer was more active and prominent. I have considered elsewhere the influence of journalism upon authorship. It enabled Poe to live. On the other hand, while he rarely made his lighter work commonplace, it limited the importance of his highest efforts, gave a paragraphic air to his criticisms, and left some of his most suggestive writings mere fragments of what they should be. He discovered the pretentious mediocrity of a host of

Summary of his career.

See Chap. XI., and cf. "Victorian Poets": pp. 81, 82.

Head and heart.

"The Imp of the Perverse."

Precarious life of American authors at that time.

scribblers, and when unbiased by personal feeling, and especially when doing imaginative work, was one of the few clear-headed writers of his day. He knew what he desired to produce, and how to produce it. We say of a man that his head may be wrong, but his heart is all right. There were times enough when the reverse of this was true of Poe. I do not say there were not other times when his heart was as sound as his perceptions. What, after all, is the record of his years of work, and what is the significance of that record? We must consider the man in his environment, and the transient, uncertain character of the markets to which he brought his wares. His labors, then, were continually impeded, broken, changed; first, by the most trying and uncontrollable nature that ever poet possessed, that ever possessed a poet; by an unquiet, capricious temper, a childish enslavement to his own "Imp of the Perverse," a scornful pettiness that made him "hard to help," that drove him to quarrel with his patient, generous friends, and to wage ignoble conflict with enemies of his own making; by physical and moral lapses, partly the result of inherited taint, in which he resorted, more or less frequently, and usually at critical moments, — seasons when he needed all his resources, all his courage and manhood, — to stimulants which he knew would madden and besot him more than other men. None the less his genius was apparent, his power felt, his labor in demand wherever the means existed to pay for it. But here, again, his life was made precarious and shifting by the speculative, ill-requited nature of literary enterprises at that time. From various causes, therefore, his record — no matter how it is attacked or defended — is one of irregularity, of broken and renewed engagements. From 1832 to 1835 Poe had

but himself to support, and a career always gets on so long as he is successful and the chance of a future. His private marriage to his sweet cousin, almost a child, was reaffirmed in setting up their home together. The Poe, with his sense of the fitness of that Bohemianism, the charm of that poorly suits the portrait of a hard-headed man. So we are not surprised, engaged, for honest wages, upon "The Literary Messenger." That his skilful genius, whether devoted to realistic invention, were now at full command. "Hans Pfaall," and by his first success to the "Messenger," the spectral tale of "Berenice." In short, he was, for that time, upon the famous list, both as tale-writer and as critic, reputation and income. Yet he found a bid sensitiveness of one spoiled by gance in youth, the difference between work-a-day life and the independence, which if again at his command, ble him to indulge his finer tastes. The work best suited to his power, he was subject to moods of brooding, crying out upon fate, that were liable to mate destruction. And so we agree to find this good beginning not more than ten years to come; and that the change by flittings here and there between employment; by new engagements, he was off with the old; by leaving and entanglements in the social

*Work.**Misfortunes.**Death, in
Baltimore,
October 7,
1849.*

alternate successes and disgraces, in Richmond, Philadelphia, Boston, New York ; by friendships and fallings out with many of the editors who employed him, — the product, after all, with which we are chiefly concerned being his always distinctive writings for the "Quarterly," "The Gentleman's Magazine," "Graham's," "Godey's," "The Mirror," "The American Review," and various other fosterers and distributors of such literature as the current taste might demand. We begin to understand his spasmodic, versatile industry, his balks and breaks, his frequent poverty, despondency, self-abandonment, and almost to wonder that the sensitive feminine spirit — worshipping beauty and abhorrent of ugliness and pain, combating with pride, with inherited disease of appetite — did not sooner yield, was not utterly overcome almost at the outset of these experiences. So have I wondered at seeing a delicate forest-bird, leagues from the shore, keep itself on the wing above relentless waters into which it was sure to fall at last.¹ Poe had his good genius and his bad. Near the close of the struggle he made a brave effort, and never was so earnest and resolved, so much his own master, as just before the end. But a man is no stronger than his weakest part, and with the snapping of that his chance is over. At the moment when the poet, rallying from the desolation caused by the loss of his wife, found new hope

¹ Finely paraphrased, since the original appearance of this chapter, by my friend, Mr. Winter : —

"Far from the blooming field and fragrant wood
The shining songster of the summer sky,
O'er ocean's black and frightful solitude,
Driven on broken wing, must sink and die";

and purpose, and was on his way to marry a woman who possibly might have saved him, the tragedy of his life began again. Its final scene was as swift, irreparable, black with terror, as that of any drama ever written. His death was gloom. Men saw him no more; but the shadow of a veiled old woman, mourning for him, hovered here and there. After many years a laurelled tomb was placed above his ashes, and there remain to American literature the relics, so unequal in value, of the most isolated and exceptional of all its poets and pioneers.

*Mrs.
Maria
Clemm.*

Poe's misfortunes were less than those of some who have conquered misfortune. Others have been cast-aways in infancy and friendless in manhood, and have found no protectors such as came at his need. Still others have struggled and suffered, and have declined to wear their hearts upon their sleeves. They have sought consolation in their work, and from their bitter experiences have gathered strength and glory. The essential part of an artist's life is that of his inspired moments. There were occasions when Poe was the master, when his criticism was true, when he composed such tales as "Ligeia," "The Fall of the House of Usher," poems like "The Raven," "The Bells," "The City in the Sea." It must be acknowledged, moreover — and professional writers know what this implies — that Poe, in his wanderings, after all, *followed his market*. It gradually drifted to the North, until New York afforded the surest recompense to authors not snugly housed in the leafy coverts of New England. Nor did he ever resort to any mercantile employment for a livelihood. As we look around and see how authors accept this or that method of support, there seems to be something chivalrous in the attitude of one who never earned a dollar except by his pen.

*The liter-
ary mar-
ket.
See pp. 22-
25, 38.*

*A genuine
man of
letters.*

From first to last he was simply a poet and man of letters, who rightly might claim to be judged by the literary product of his life. The life itself differed from that of any modern poet of equal genius, and partly because none other has found himself, in a new country, among such elements. Too much has been written about the man, too little of his times.

*Interest
excited by
Poe's life
and works.*

His story has had a fascination for those who consider the infirmity of genius its natural outward sign. The peculiarity of his actions was their leaning toward what is called the melodramatic; of his work, that it aimed above the level of its time. What has been written of the former—of little value as compared with the analysis derivable from his literary remains—was for a long time the output of those who, if unable to produce a stanza which he would have acknowledged, at least felt within themselves the possibilities of his errant career. Yet, as I observe the marvels of his handicraft, I seem unjust to these enthusiasts. It was the kind which most impresses the imagination of youth, and youth is a period at which the critical development of many biographers seems to be arrested. And who would not recall the zest with which he read, in school-boy days, and by the stolen candle, a legend so fearful in its beauty and so beautiful in its fear as "The Masque of the Red Death," for example, found in some stray number of a magazine, and making the printed trash that convoyed it seem so vapid and drear? Not long after, we had the collected series, *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*. With what eagerness we caught them from hand to hand until many of us knew them almost by heart. In the East, at that time, Hawthorne was already putting out his "Mosses"

*"Tales of
the Gro-
tesque and
Ara-
besque."*

aimless sentimentalists, two such spirits at once, each original in his kind. To-day we have a more consummate, realistic art. But where, now, the creative ardor, the power to touch the stops, if need be, of tragedy and superstition and remorse! Our taste is more refined, our faculties are under control; to produce the greatest art they must, at times, compel the artist. "Poetry," said Poe, "has been with me a passion, not a purpose," — a remarkable sentence to be found in a boyish preface, and I believe that he wrote the truth. But here, again, he displays an opposite failing. If poetry had been with him no less a passion, and equally a purpose, we now should have had something more to represent his rhythmical genius than the few brief, occasional lyrics which are all that his thirty years of life as a poet — the life of his early choice — have left to us.

*Poetry a
passion
with him.*

III.

IN estimating him as a poet, the dates of these lyrics are of minor consequence. They make but a thin volume, smaller than one which might hold the verse of Collins or Gray. Their range is narrower still. It is a curious fact that Poe struck, in youth, the key-notes of a few themes, and that some of his best pieces, as we now have them, are but variations upon their earlier treatment.

*Lyrical
remains.*

His first collection was made in his eighteenth year, revised in his twentieth, and again reprinted, with changes and omissions, just after he left West Point. The form of the longer poems is copied from Byron and Moore, while the spirit of the whole series vaguely reminds us of Shelley in his obscurer lyrical mood. Poe's originality can be found in them, but they would

*Early
books of
verse:
printed,
respectively,
in 1827,
1829, and
1831.*

*Germes of
his later
poems.*

be valueless except for his after career. They have unusual significance as the shapeless germs of much that was to grow into form and beauty. Crude and wandering pieces, entitled "Fairy Land" and "Irene," "To —," "A Pæan," etc., were the originals of "The Sleeper," "A Dream within a Dream," and "Lenore"; while "The Doomed City" and "The Valley Nis" reappear as "The City in the Sea" and "The Valley of Unrest." Others were less thoroughly rewritten. Possibly he thus remodelled his juvenile verse to show that, however inchoate, it contained something worth a master's handling. Mr. Stoddard thinks, and not without reason, that he found it an easy way of making salable "copy." The poet himself intimates that circumstances beyond his control restricted his lyrical product. I scarcely remember another instance where a writer has so hoarded his early songs, and am in doubt whether to commend or deprecate their reproduction. It does not betoken affluence, but it was honest in Poe that he would not write in cold blood for the mere sake of composing. This he undoubtedly had the skill to do, and would have done, if his sole object had been creation of the beautiful, or art for art's sake. He used his lyrical gift mostly to express veritable feelings and moods — I might almost say a single feeling or mood — to which he could not otherwise give utterance, resorting to melody when prose was insufficient. Herein he was true to the cardinal, antique conception of poesy, and in keeping it distinct from his main literary work he confirmed his own avowal that it was to him a passion, and neither a purpose nor a pursuit.

*His use of
poesy.*

Precocity.

A few poems, just as they stood in his early volumes, are admirable in thought or finish. One is the sonnet, "To Science," which is striking, not as a son-

net, but for its premonition of attitudes which poetry and science have now more clearly assumed. Another is the exquisite lyric, "To Helen," which every critic longs to cite. Its confusion of imagery is wholly forgotten in the delight afforded by melody, lyrical perfection, sweet and classic grace. I do not understand why he omitted this charming trifle from the juvenile poems which he added to the collection of 1845. Although it first appeared in his edition of 1831, he claimed to have written it when fourteen, and nothing more fresh and delicate came from his pen in maturer years.

The instant success of "The Raven" — and this was within a few years of his death — first made him popular as a poet, and resulted in a new collection of his verses. The lyrics which it contained, and a few written afterward, — "Ulalume," "The Bells," "For Annie," etc., — now comprise the whole of his poetry as retained in the standard editions. The most glaring faults of "Al Aaraaf" and "Tamerlane" have been selected by eulogists for special praise. Turning from this practice-work to the poems which made his reputation, we come at once to the most widely known of all.

Poe could not have written "The Raven" in youth. It exhibits a method so positive as almost to compel us to accept, against the denial of his associates, his own account of its building. The maker *does* keep a firm hand on it throughout, and for once seems to set his purpose above his passion. This appears in the gravely quaint diction, and in the contrast between the reality of every-day manners and the profounder reality of a spiritual shadow upon the human heart. The grimness of fate is suggested by phrases which it requires a masterly hand to subdue to the meaning of

"The
Raven and
Other
Poems,"
1845-

"The
Raven."

the poem. "‘Sir,’ said I, ‘or madam,’" "this ungainly fowl," and the like, sustain the air of grotesqueness, and become a foil to the pathos, an approach to the tragical climax, of this unique production. Only genius can deal so closely with the grotesque, and make it add to the solemn beauty of structure an effect like that of the gargoyles seen by moonlight on the façade of Notre Dame.

*Not his
subtlest
poem.*

In no other lyric is Poe so self-possessed. No other is so determinate in its repetends and alliterations. Hence I am far from deeming it his most poetical poem. Its artificial qualities are those which catch the fancy of the general reader ; and it is of all his ballads, if not the most imaginative, the most peculiar. His more ethereal productions seem to me those in which there is the appearance, at least, of spontaneity, — in which he yields to his feelings, while dying falls and cadences most musical, most melancholy, come from him unawares. Literal criticisms of "The Raven" are of small account. If the shadow of the bird could not fall upon the mourner, the shadows of its evil presence could brood upon his soul ; the seraphim whose footfalls tinkle upon the tufted floor may be regarded as seraphim of the Orient, their anklets hung with celestial bells. At all events, Poe's raven is the very genius of the Night's Plutonian shore, different from other ravens, entirely his own, and none other can take its place. It is an emblem of the Irreparable, the guardian of pitiless memories, whose burden ever recalls to us the days that are no more.

*"The City
in the
Sea."*

As a new creation, then, "The Raven" is entitled to a place in literature, and keeps it. But how much more imaginative is such a poem as "The City in the Sea" ! As a picture, this reminds us of Turner, and, again, of that sublime madman, John Martin. Here

is a strange city where Death has raised a throne.
Its

“shrines and palaces and towers
(Time-eaten towers that tremble not!)
Resemble nothing that is ours.
Around, by lifting winds forgot,
Resignedly beneath the sky
The melancholy waters lie.”

This mystical town is aglow with light, not from
heaven, but from out the lurid sea, — light which
streams up the turrets and pinnacles and domes, —

“Up many and many a marvellous shrine,
Whose wreathed friezes intertwine
The viol, the violet, and the vine.

While, from a proud tower in the town,
Death looks gigantically down.”

The sea about is hideously serene, but at last there
is a movement; the towers seem slightly to sink; the
dull tide has a redder glow, —

“And when, amid no earthly moans,
Down, down that town shall settle hence,
Hell, rising from a thousand thrones,
Shall do it reverence.”

This poem, notwithstanding its sombreness and terror, depends upon effects which made Poe the forerunner of our chief experts in form and sound, and both the language and the conception are suggestive in a high degree.

“The Sleeper” is even more poetic. It distills, like drops from the opiate vapor of the swooning moonlit night, all the melody, the fantasy, the exaltation, that befit the vision of a beautiful woman lying in her shroud, silent in her length of tress, waiting to exchange her death chamber

“*The Sleeper.*”

“for one more holy,
This bed, for one more melancholy.”

Poe's ideality cannot be gainsaid, but it aided him with few, very few, images, and those seemed to haunt his brain perpetually. Such an image is that of the beings who lend their menace to the tone of the funeral bells :—

“And the people, — ah, the people, —
They that dwell up in the steeple
All alone,
And who, tolling, tolling, tolling,
In that muffled monotone,
Feel a glory in so rolling
On the human heart a stone, —
They are neither man nor woman,
They are neither brute nor human,
They are Ghouls.”

“ *The
Bells.* ”

In the same remarkable fantasia the bells themselves become human, and it is a master-stroke that makes us hear them shriek out of tune,

“In a clamorous appealing to the mercy of the fire,”

and forces us to the very madness with which they are

“Leaping higher, higher, higher,
With a desperate desire,
And a resolute endeavor
Now — now to sit, or never,
By the side of the pale-faced moon.”

Clearly this extravagance was suggested by the picture and the rhyme. But it so carries us with it that we think not of its meaning; we share in the delirium of the bells, and nothing can be too extreme for the abandon to which we yield ourselves, led by the faith and frenzy of the poet.

The hinting, intermittent qualities of a few lyrics

remind us of Shelley and Coleridge, with whom Poe always was in sympathy. The conception of "The Raven" was new, but in method it bears a likeness to "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," so closely, in fact, that the rhythm of the one probably was suggested by that of the other. In motive they are so different that neither Poe nor Mrs. Browning could feel aggrieved. After an examination of dates, and of other matters relating to the genesis of each poem, I have satisfied myself, against much reasoning to the contrary, that Poe derived his use of the refrain and repetend, here and elsewhere, from the English sibyl, by whom they were employed to the verge of mannerism in her earliest lyrics.

"The Conqueror Worm" expresses in a single moan the hopelessness of the poet's vigils among the tombs, where he demanded of silence and the night some tidings of the dead. All he knew was that

"No voice from that sublimer world hath ever
To sage or poet these responses given."

The most he dared to ask for "The Sleeper" was oblivion; that her sleep might be as deep as it was lasting. We lay the dead "in the cold ground" or in the warm, flower-springing bosom of dear Earth, as best may fit the hearts of those who mourn them. But the tomb, the end of mortality, is voiceless still. If you would find the beginning of immortality, seek some other oracle. "The Conqueror Worm" is the most despairing of lyrics, yet quite essential to the mystical purpose of the tale "Ligeia." But to brood upon men as mimes, ironically cast "in the form of God on high," — mere puppets, where

"the play is the tragedy, 'Man,'
And its hero the Conqueror Worm,"

*Use of the
refrain
and repe-
tend, by
Mrs.
Browning
and by
Poe. Cf.
"Victori-
an Poets":
p. 145.*

*"The Con-
queror
Worm."*

*Requiem.**Art's
strong
compul-
sion.**"Ula-
lume."*

— that way madness lies, indeed. In the lyric, "For Annie," death is a trance ; the soul lingers, calm and at rest, for the fever, called living, is conquered. Human love remains, and its last kiss is still a balm. Something may be hereafter, — but what, who knows ? For repose, and for delicate and unstudied melody, it is one of Poe's truest poems, and his tenderest. During the brief period in which he survived his wife, he seemed to have a vision of rest in death, and not of horror. Two lyrics, widely different, and one of them of a most singular nature, are thought to be requiems for his lost companion. It is from no baseness, but from a divine instinct, that genuine artists are compelled' to go on with their work and to make their own misery, no less than their joy, promote its uses. Their most sacred experiences become, not of their volition, its themes and illustrations. Every man as an individual is secondary to what he is as a worker for the progress of his kind and the glory of the gift allotted to him.

Therefore, whether Poe adored his wife or not, her image became the ideal of these poems. I shall add little here to all that has been written of "Ulalume." It is so strange, so unlike anything that preceded it, so vague and yet so full of meaning, that of itself it might establish a new method. To me it seems an improvisation, such as a violinist might play upon the instrument which had become his one thing of worth after the death of a companion had left him alone with his own soul. Poe remodelled and made the most of his first broken draft, and had the grace not to analyze the process. I have accepted his analysis of "The Raven" as more than half true. Poets know that an entire poem often is suggested by one of its lines, even by a refrain or a bit of rhythm. From this

it builds itself. The last or any other stanza may be written first; and what at first is without form is not void,—for ultimately it will be perfected into shape and meaning. If “Ulalume” may be termed a requiem, “Annabel Lee” is a tuneful dirge,—the simplest of Poe’s melodies, and the most likely to please the common ear. It is said to have been his last lyric, and was written, I think, with more spontaneity than others. The theme is carried along skilfully, the movement hastened and heightened to the end and there dwelt upon, as often in a piece of music. Before considering the poet’s method of song, I will mention the two poems which seem to me to represent his highest range, and sufficient in themselves to preserve the memory of a lyrist.

We overlook the allegory of “The Haunted Palace,” until it has been read more than once; we think of the sound, the phantasmagoric picture, the beauty, the lurid close. The magic muse of Coleridge, in “Kubla Khan,” or elsewhere, hardly went beyond such lines as these:—

“Banners yellow, glorious, golden,
On its roof did float and flow,
(This—all this—was in the olden
Time long ago;)
And every gentle air that dallied,
In that sweet day,
Along the ramparts, plumed and pallid,
A wingèd odor went away.”

The conception of a “Lost Mind” never has been so imaginatively treated, whether by poet or by painter. Questioning Poe’s own mental state, look at this poem and see how sane, as an artist, he was that made it. “Do you act best when you forget yourself in the part?” “No, for then I forget to perfect the part.”

“Annabel
Lee.”

Poe’s
highest
lyrical
range.

“The
Haunted
Palace.”

"*Israfel*," Even more striking is the song of "*Israfel*," whose heart-strings are a lute. Of all these lyrics is not this the most lyrical, — not only charged with music, but with light? For once, and in his freest hour of youth, Poe got above the sepulchres and mists, even beyond the pale-faced moon, and visited the empyrean. There is joy in this carol, and the radiance of the skies, and ecstatic possession of the gift of song : —

"If I could dwell
Where *Israfel*
Hath dwelt, and he where I,
He might not sing so wildly well
A mortal melody,
While a bolder note than this might swell
From my lyre within the sky!"

All this, with the rapturous harmony of the first and third stanzas, is awakened in the poet's soul by a line from a discourse on the Koran, and the result is even finer than the theme. If I had any claim to make up a "*Parnassus*," not perhaps of the most famous English lyrics, but of those which appeal strongly to my own poetic sense, and could select but one of Poe's, I confess that I should choose "*Israfel*," for pure music, for exaltation, and for its original, satisfying quality of rhythmic art.

IV.

Few and brief are these *reliquia* which determine his fame as a poet. What do they tell us of his lyrical genius and method? Clearly enough, that he possessed an exquisite faculty, which he exercised within definite bounds. It may be that within those bounds he would have done more if events had not hindered him, as he declared, "from making any se-

An exquisite but limited faculty.

rious effort" in the field of his choice. In boyhood he had decided views as to the province of song, and he never afterward changed them. The preface to his West Point edition, rambling and conceited as it is, — affording such a contrast to the proud humility of Keats's preface to "Endymion," — gives us the gist of his creed, and shows that the instinct of the young poet was scarcely less delicate than that of his nobler kinsman. Poe thought the object of poetry was pleasure, not truth; the pleasure must not be definite, but subtle, and therefore poetry is opposed to romance; music is an *essential*, "since the comprehension of sweet sound is our most indefinite conception." Metaphysics in verse he hated, pronouncing the Lake theory a new form of didacticism that had injured even the tuneful Coleridge. For a neophyte this was not bad, and after certain reservations few will disagree with him. Eighteen years later, in his charming lecture, "The Poetic Principle," he offered simply an extension of these ideas, with reasons why a long poem "cannot exist." One is tempted to rejoin that the standard of length in a poem, as in a piece of music, is relative, depending upon the power of the maker and the recipient to prolong their exalted moods. We might, also, quote Landor's "Pentameron," concerning the greatness of a poet, or even Beecher's saying that "pint measures are soon filled." The lecture justly denounces the "heresy of the didactic," and then declares poetry to be the child of Taste, — devoted solely to the Rhythmical Creation of Beauty, as it is in music that the soul most nearly attains the supernal end for which it struggles. In fine, Poe, with "the mad pride of intellectuality," refused to look beyond the scope of his own gift, and would restrict the poet to one method and even to a

Poe's
theory of
poetry.

Cp. "Vic-
torian
Poets":
p. 127.

"The
Poetic
Principle,"
1845.

The
Rhythmical
Creation
of
Beauty.

single theme. In his *ex post facto* analysis of "The Raven" he conceives the highest tone of beauty to be sadness, caused by the pathos of existence and our inability to grasp the unknown. Of all beauty that of a beautiful woman is the supremest, her death is the saddest loss — and therefore. "the most poetical topic in the world." He would treat this musically by application of the refrain, increasing the sorrowful loveliness of his poem by contrast of something homely, fantastic, or quaint.

A melodist.

The refrain and repetend.

Poe's own range was quite within his theory. His juvenile versions of what afterward became poems were so very "indefinite" as to express almost nothing; they resembled those marvellous stanzas of Dr. Chivers, that sound magnificently, — I have heard Bayard Taylor and Swinburne rehearse them with shouts of delight — and that have no meaning at all. Poe could not remain a Chivers, but sound always was his forte. We rarely find his highest imagination in his verse, or the creation of poetic phrases such as came to the lips of Keats without a summons. He lacked the dramatic power of combination, and produced no symphony in rhythm, — was strictly a melodist, who achieved wonders in a single strain. Neither Mrs. Browning nor any other poet had "applied" the refrain in Poe's fashion, nor so effectively. In "The Bells" its use is limited almost to one word, the only English word, perhaps, that could be repeated incessantly as the burden of such a poem. In "The Raven," "Lenore," and elsewhere, he employed the repetend also, and with still more novel results: —

"An anthem for the queenliest dead that ever died so young,
A dirge for her, the doubly dead, in that she died so young."

"Our talk had been serious and sober,

But our thoughts they were palsied and sere,
Our memories were treacherous and sere."

One thing profitably may be noted by latter-day poets. Poe used none but elementary English measures, relying upon his music and atmosphere for their effect. This is true of those which seem most intricate, as in "The Bells" and "Ulalume." "Lenore" and "For Annie" are the simplest of ballad forms. I have a fancy that our Southern poet's ear caught the music of "Annabel Lee" and "Eulalie," if not their special quality, from the plaintive, melodious negro songs utilized by those early writers of "minstrelsy" who have been denominated the only composers of a genuine American school. This suggestion may be scouted, but an expert might suspect the one to be a patrician refinement upon the melody, feeling, and humble charm of the other.

*Use of
simple ballad forms.*

Poe was not a single-poem poet, but the poet of a single mood. His materials were seemingly a small stock in trade, chiefly of Angels and Demons, with an attendance of Dreams, Echoes, Ghouls, Gnomes and Mimes, ready at hand. He selected or coined, for use and re-use, a number of what have been called "beautiful words," — "albatross," "halcyon," "scintillant," "Ligeia," "Weir," "Yaanek," "Auber," "D'Elormie," and the like. Everything was subordinate to sound. But his poetry, as it places us under the spell of the senses, enables us to enter, through their reaction upon the spirit, his indefinable mood; nor should we forget that Coleridge owes his specific rank as a poet, not to his philosophic verse, but to melodious fragments, and greatly to the rhythm of "The Ancient Mariner" and of "Christabel." Poe's melodies lure us to the point where we seem to hear angelic lutes and citherns, or elfin instruments that make music in "the

*Effects of
sound.*

land east of the sun and west of the moon." The enchantment may not be that of Israfel, nor of the harper who exorcised the evil genius of Saul, but it is at least that of some plumed being of the middle air, of a charmer charming so sweetly that his numbers are the burden of mystic dreams.

V.

*Poe most
eminent
as a ro-
mancer.*

IF Poe's standing depended chiefly upon these few poems, notable as they are, his name would be recalled less frequently. His intellectual strength and rarest imagination are to be found in his *Tales*. To them, and to literary criticism, his main labors were devoted.

*Revolt
against the
common-
place.*

The limits of this chapter constrain me to say less than I have in mind concerning his prose writings. As with his poems, so with the "*Tales*,"—their dates are of little importance. His irregular life forced him to alternate good work with bad, and some of his best stories were written early. He was an apostle of the art that refuses to take its color from a given time or country, and of the revolt against commonplace, and his inventions partook of the romantic and the wonderful. He added to a Greek perception of form the Oriental passion for decoration. All the materials of the wizard's craft were at his command. He was not a pupil of Beckford, Godwin, Maturin, Hoffman, or Fouqué; and yet if these writers were to be grouped we should think also of Poe, and give him no second place among them. "The young fellow is highly imaginative, and a little given to the terrific," said Kennedy, in his honest way. Poe could not have written a novel, as we term it, as well as the feeblest of Harper's or Roberts's yearlings. He vibrated between two

points, the realistic and the mystic, and made no attempt to combine people or situations in ordinary life, though he knew how to lead up to a dramatic tableau or crisis. His studies of character were not made from observation, but from acquaintance with himself; and this subjectivity, or egoism, crippled his invention and made his "Tales" little better than prose poems. He could imagine a series of adventures—the experience of a single narrator—like "Arthur Gordon Pym," and might have been, not Le Sage nor De Foe, but an eminent raconteur in his own field. His strength is unquestionable in those clever pieces of ratiocination, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt," "The Purloined Letter"; in some of a more fantastic type, "The Gold Bug" and "Hans Pfaall"; and especially in those with elements of terror and morbid psychology added, such as "The Descent into the Maelstrom," "The Black Cat," "The Tell-tale Heart," and the mesmeric sketches. When composing these he delighted in the exercise of his dexterous intellect, like a workman testing his skill. No poet is of a low grade who possesses, besides an ear for rhythm, the resources of a brain so fine and active. Technical gifts being equal, the more intellectual of two poets is the greater. "Best bard, because the wisest."

His artistic contempt for metaphysics is seen even in those tales which appear most transcendental. They are charged with a feeling that in the realms of psychology we are dealing with something ethereal, which is none the less substance if we might but capture it. They are his resolute attempts to find a clew to the invisible world. Were he living now, how much he would make of our discoveries in light and sound, of the correlation of forces! He strove by a kind of

*Realism
and mysticism.*

Psychologic analysis.

*Contempt
for metaphysics.*

*Master-
pieces.*

divination to put his hand upon the links of mind and matter, and reach the hiding-places of the soul. It galled him that anything should lie outside the domain of human intelligence. His imperious intellect rebelled against the bounds that shut us in, and found passionate expression in works of which "Ligeia," "The Fall of the House of Usher," and "William Wilson" are the best types. The tales in which lyrics are introduced are full of complex beauty, the choicest products of his genius. They are the offspring of yearnings that lifted him so far above himself as to make us forget his failings and think of him only as a creative artist, a man of noble gifts.

*Poe and
Haw-
thorne.*

In these short, purely ideal efforts — finished as an artist finishes a portrait, or a poet his poem — Poe had few equals in recent times. That he lacked sustained power of invention is proved, not by his failure to complete an extended work, but by his under-estimation of its value. Such a man measures everything by his personal ability, and finds plausible grounds for the resulting standard. Hawthorne had the growing power and the staying power that gave us "The Scarlet Letter" and "The House of the Seven Gables." Poe and Hawthorne were the last of the romancers. Each was a master in his way, and that of Poe was the more obvious and material. He was expert in much that concerns the structure of works, and the modelling touches of the poet left beauty-marks upon his prose. Yet in spiritual meaning his tales were less poetic than those of Hawthorne. He relied upon his externals, making the utmost of their gorgeousness of color, their splendor and gloom of light and shade. Hawthorne found the secret meaning of common things, and knew how to capture from the plainest aspects of

Poe often were unable to perceive. It was Hawthorne who heard the melodies too fine for mortal ear. Hawthorne was wholly masculine, with the great tenderness and gentleness which belong to virile souls. Poe had, with the delicacy, the sophistry and weakness of a nature more or less effeminate. He opposed to Hawthorne the fire, the richness, the instability of the tropics, as against the abiding strength and passion of the North. His own conceptions astonished him, and he often presents himself "with hair on end, at his own wonders." Of these two artists and seers, the New Englander had the profounder insight; the Southerner's magic was that of the necromancer who resorts to spells and devices, and, when some apparition by chance responds to his incantations, is bewildered by the phantom himself has raised.

Poe failed to see that the Puritanism by which Hawthorne's strength was tempered was also the source from which it sprang; and in his general criticism did not pay full tribute to a genius he must have felt. In some of his sketches, such as "The Man of the Crowd," he used Hawthorne's method, and with inferior results. His reviews of other authors and his occasional literary notes have been so carefully preserved as to show his nature by a mental and moral photograph. His *Marginalia*, scrappy and written for effect, are the notes of a thinking man of letters. The criticisms raised a hubbub in their day, and made Poe the bogey of his generation — the unruly censor whom weaklings not only had cause to fear, but often regarded with a sense of cruel injustice. I acknowledge their frequent dishonesty, vulgarity, prejudice, but do not, therefore, hold them to be worthless. Even a scourge, a pestilence, has its uses; before it the puny and frail go down, the fittest survive. And so it was in

"*Marginalia*."

"*The Literati*,"
1846.

Cp. pp.
42-44.

Satire.

Poe's foray. Better that a time of unproductiveness should follow such a thinning out than that false and feeble things should continue. I suspect that *The Literati* made room for a new movement, sure though long delayed, in American authorship. Mr. Higginson, however, is entirely right when he intimates that Margaret Fuller, by her independent reviews in "The Tribune," sustained her full and early part in the chase against "such small deer." The shafts of *Dian* were more surely sped, and much less vindictively, than the spear of her brother-huntsman. Poe's sketches are a prose *Dunciad*, waspish and unfair, yet not without touches of magnanimity. He had small respect for the feeling that it is well for a critic to discover beauties, since any one can point out faults. When, as in the cases of Tennyson, Mrs. Browning, Taylor, and others, he pronounced favorably upon the talents of a claimant, and was uninfluenced by personal motives, his judgments not seldom have been justified by the after-career. Besides, what a cartoon he drew of the writers of his time, — the corrective of Griswold's optimistic delineations! In the description of a man's personal appearance he had the art of placing the subject before us with a single touch. His tender mercies were cruel; he never forgot to prod the one sore spot of the author he most approved, — was especially intolerant of his own faults in others, and naturally detected these at once. When meting out punishment to a pretentious writer, he revelled in his task, and often made short work, as if the pleasure was too great to be endurable. The keenness of his satire, just or unjust, is mitigated by its obvious ferocity: one instinctively takes part with the victim. Nothing in journalistic criticism, even at that time, was more scathing and ludicrous than his conceit of a popular bookwright in the act of confabu-

lation with the Universe. But he marred the work by coarseness, telling one man that he was by no means a fool, although he did write "De Vere," and heading a paper on the gentlest and most forbearing of poets — "Mr. Longfellow and other Plagiarists." In short, he constantly dulled the edge and temper of his rapier, and resorted to the broad-axe, using the latter even in his deprecation of its use by Kit North. Perhaps it was needed in those salad days by offenders who could be put down in no other wise; but I hold it a sign of progress that criticism by force of arms would now be less effective.

Broad-axe criticism.

VI.

SOME analysis of Poe's general equipment will not be out of place. Only in the most perfect tales can his English style be called excellent, however significant his thought. His mannerisms — constant employment of the *dash* for suggestiveness, and a habit of italicizing to make a point or strengthen an illusion — are wearisome, and betray a lack of confidence in his skill to use plain methods. While asserting the power of words to convey absolutely any idea of the human mind, he relied on sound, quaintness, surprise, and other artificial aids. His prose is inferior to Hawthorne's; but sometimes he excels Hawthorne in qualities of form and proportion which are specially at the service of authors who are also poets. The abrupt beginnings of his stories often are artistic: —

Poe's equipment and genius.

"We had now reached the summit of the loftiest crag. For some minutes the old man seemed too much exhausted to speak." ("Descent into the Maelstrom.")

"The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as best I could; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge." ("The Cask of Amontillado.")

"*The
Fall of the
House of
Usher.*"

Balzac.

*Poe's im-
agination.*

*The fan-
tastic.*

His endings were equally good, when he had a clear knowledge of his own purpose, and some of his conceptions terminate at a dramatic crisis. The tone, also, of his masterpieces is well sustained throughout. In "The Fall of the House of Usher," the approach to the fated spot, the air, the landscape, the tarn, the mansion itself, are a perfect study, equal to the ride of Childe Roland, — and here Poe excels Browning: we not only come with him to the dark tower, but we enter and partake its mystery, and alone know the secret of its accursed fate. The poet's analytic faculty has been compared to that of Balzac, but a parallel goes no farther than the material side. In condensation he surpassed either Balzac or Hawthorne.

His imagination was not of the highest order, for he never dared to trust to it implicitly; certainly not in his poetry, since he could do nothing with a measure like blank verse, which is barren in the hands of a mere songster, but the glory of English metrical forms when employed by one commanding the strength of diction, the beauty and grandeur of thought, and all the resources of a strongly imaginative poet. Neither in verse nor in prose did he cut loose from his minor devices, and for results of sublimity and awe he always depends upon that which is grotesque or out of nature. Beauty of the fantastic or grotesque is not the highest beauty. Art, like nature, must be fantastic, not in her frequent, but in her exceptional moods. The rarest ideal dwells in a realm beyond that which fascinates us by its strangeness or terror, and the votaries of the latter have masters above them as high as Raphael is above Doré.

In genuine humor Poe seemed utterly wanting. He

and at once ; but his powers of irony and satire were so great as to make his frequent lapses into invective the more humiliating. The command of humor has distinguished men whose genius was both high and broad. If inessential to exalted poetic work, its absence is hurtful to the critical and polemic essay. Poe knew this as well as any one, but a measureless self-esteem would not acknowledge the flaw in his armor. Hence efforts which involved the delusion that humor may come by works and not by inborn gift. Humor is congenital and rare, the fruit of natural mellowness, of sensitiveness to the light and humane phases of life. It is, moreover, set in action by an unselfish heart. Such is the mirth of Thackeray, of Cervantes and Molière, and of the one master of English song. Poe's consciousness of his defect, and his refusal to believe it incurable, are manifest in trashy sketches for which he had a market, and which are humorous only to one who sees the ludicrous side of their failure. He analyzed mirth as the product of incongruity, and went to work upon a theory to produce it. The result is seen not only in the extravaganzas to which I refer, — and it is a pity that these should have been hunted up so laboriously, — but in the use of what he thought was humor to barb his criticisms, and as a contrast to the exciting passages of his analytical tales. One of his sketches, "The Duc de l'Omelette," after the lighter French manner, has grace and jaunty persiflage, but most of his whimsical "pot-boilers" are deplorably absurd. There is something akin to humor in the sub-handling of his favorite themes, — such as the awe and mystery of death, the terrors of pestilence, insanity, or remorse. The grotesque and nether side of these matters presents itself to him, and then his irony, with its repulsive fancies, is as near humor as he ever

*Quality of
the great
humorists.
Cp. "Victorian
Poets":
pp. 73, 77.*

*The gro-
tesque.*

*Character
of his
scholar-
ship.*

*Affecta-
tion of
learning.*

*A good
reference-
knowledge.*

approaches. That is to say, it is grave-yard humor, the kind which sends a chill down our backs, and implies a contempt for our bodies and souls, for the perils, helplessness, and meanness of the stricken human race.

Poe is sometimes called a man of extraordinary learning. Upon a first acquaintance, one might receive the impression that his scholarship was not only varied, but thorough. A study of his works has satisfied me that he possessed literary resources and knew how to make the most of them. In this he resembled Bulwer, and, with far less abundant materials than the latter required, employed them as speciously. He easily threw a glamour of erudition about his work, by the use of phrases from old authors he had read, or among whose treatises he had foraged with special design. It was his knack to cull sentences which, taken by themselves, produce a weird or impressive effect, and to reframe them skilfully. This plan was clever, and resulted in something that could best be muttered "darkly, at dead of night"; but it partook of trickery, even in its art. He had little exact scholarship, nor needed it, dealing, as he did, not with the processes of learning, but with results that could subserve the play of his imagination. Shakespeare's anachronisms and illusions were made as he required them, and with a fine disdain. Poe resorted to them of malice aforethought, and under pretence of correctness. Still, the work of a romancer and poet is not that of a book-worm. What he needs is a good reference-knowledge, and this Poe had. His irregular school-boy training was not likely to give him the scholastic habit, nor would his impatient manhood otherwise have confirmed it. I am sure that we may

most worth which was devoted, as in the case of many a born writer, to the unconscious education obtained from the reading, for the mere love of it, of *all* books to which he had access. This training served him well. It enabled him to give his romance an alchemic air, by citation from writers like Chapman, Thomas More, Bishop King, etc., and from Latin and French authors in profusion. His French tendencies were natural, and he learned enough of the language to read much of its current literature and get hold of modes unknown to many of his fellow-writers. I have said that his stock in trade was narrow, but for the adroit display of it examine any of his tales and sketches, — for example, "Berenice," or "The Assignment."

In knowledge of what may be called the properties of his romance, he was more honestly grounded. He had the good fortune to utilize the Southern life and scenery which he knew in youth. It chanced, also, that during some years of his boyhood — that formative period whose impressions are indelible — he lived in a characteristic part of England. He had seen with his own eyes castles, abbeys, the hangings and tapestries and other by-gone trappings of ancient rooms, and remembered effects of decoration and color which always came to his aid. These he used as if he were born to them ; never, certainly, with the surprise at their richness which vulgarizes Disraeli's "Lothair." In some way, known to genius, he also caught the romance of France, of Italy, of the Orient, and one tale or another is transfused with their atmosphere ; while the central figure, however disguised, is always the image of the romancer himself. His equipment, on the whole, was not a pedant's, much less that of a searcher after truth ; it was that of a poet and

His materials.

"*Eureka* :
a Prose
Poem,"
1848.

A lay-
man's im-
aginative
venture.
Cp. "*Vic-
torian
Poets*":
pp. 19, 20.

Poetic in-
duction.

a literary workman. Yet he had the hunger which animates the imaginative student, and, had he been led to devote himself to science, would have contributed to the sum of knowledge. In writing *Eureka* he was unquestionably sincere, and forgot himself more nearly than in any other act of his professional life. But here his inexact learning betrayed him. What was begun in conviction — a swift generalization from scientific theories of the universe — grew to be so far beyond the data at his command, or so inconsistent with them, that he finally saw he had written little else than a prose poem, and desired that it should be so regarded. Of all sciences, astronomy appeals most to the imagination. What is rational in "*Eureka*" mostly is a re-statement of accepted theories: otherwise the treatise is vague and nebulous, — a light dimmed by its own vapor. The work is curiously saturated with our modern Pantheism; and although in many portions it shows the author's weariness, yet it was a notable production for a layman venturing within the precincts of the savant. The poetic instinct hits upon truths which the science of the future confirms; but as often, perhaps, it glorifies some error sprung from a too ardent generalization. Poe's inexactness was shown in frequent slips, — sometimes made unconsciously, sometimes in reliance upon the dulness of his rivals to save him from detection. He was on the alert for other people's errors; for his own facts, were he now alive, he could not call so lightly upon his imagination. Even our younger authors, here and abroad, now are so well equipped that their learning seems to handicap their winged steeds. Poe had, above all, the gift of poetic induction. He would have divined the nature of an unknown world from a specimen of its flora, a fragment of its art. He felt himself

something more than a bookman. He was a creator of the beautiful, and hence the conscious struggle of his spirit for the sustenance it craved. Even when he was most in error, he labored as an artist, and it is idle criticism that judges him upon any other ground.

Accept him, then, whether as poet or romancer, as a pioneer of the art feeling in American literature. So far as he was devoted to art for art's sake, it was for her sake as the exponent of beauty. No man ever lived in whom the passion for loveliness more plainly governed the emotions and convictions. His service of the beautiful was idolatry, and he would have kneeled with Heine at the feet of Our Lady of Milo, and believed that she yearned to help him. This consecration to absolute beauty made him abhor the mixture of sentimentalism, metaphysics, and morals, in its presentation. It was a foregone conclusion that neither Longfellow, Emerson, Lowell, nor Hawthorne should wholly satisfy him. The question of "moral" tendency concerned him not in the least. He did not feel with Keats that "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," and that a divine perfection may be reached by either road. This deficiency narrowed his range both as a poet and as a critic. His sense of justice was a sense of the fitness of things, and—strange to say—when he put it aside he forgot that he was doing an unseemly thing. Otherwise, he represents, or was one of the first to lead, a rebellion against formalism, commonplace, the spirit of the bourgeois. In this movement Whitman is his countertype at the pole opposite from that of art; and hence they justly are picked out from the rest of us and associated in foreign minds. Taste was Poe's supreme faculty. Beauty, to him, was a definite and logical reality, and he would have scouted Véron's

Poe's absolute love of beauty.

His protest against didacticism.

Taste.

*Isolation.**Decorative feeling.**A tragedy.**A singular and pathetic career.*

claim that it has no fixed objective laws, and exists only in the nature of the observer. Although the brakes of art were on his imagination, his taste was not wholly pure ; he vacillated between the classic forms and those allied with color, splendor, Oriental decoration ; between his love for the antique and his impressions of the mystical and grotesque. But he was almost without confraternity. An artist in an unartistic period, he had to grope his way, to contend with stupidity and coarseness. Again, his imagination, gloating upon the possibilities of taste, violated its simplicity. Poe longed for the lamp of Aladdin, for the riches of the Gnomes. Had unbounded wealth been his, he would have outvied Beckford, Landor, Dumas, in barbaric extravagance of architecture. His efforts to apply the laws of the beautiful to imaginary decoration, architecture, landscape, are very fascinating as seen in "The Philosophy of Furniture," "Landscape Gardening," and "Landor's Cottage." "The Domain of Arnheim" is a marvellous dream of an earthly paradise, and the close is a piece of word-painting as effective as the language contains. Regarding this sensitive artist, this original poet, it seems indeed a tragedy that a man so ideal in either realm, so unfit for contact with ugliness, dulness, brutality, should have come to eat husks with the swine, to be misused by their human counterparts, and to die the death of a drunkard, in the refuge which society offers to the most forlorn and hopeless of its castaways.

VII.

SEEKING our illustrations of the poetic life, we find no career of more touching and peculiar interest than

that of Poe. It is said that disaster followed him even after death, in the vicious memoir which Griswold prefixed to his collected works; and doubtless the poet should have had for his biographer a man of kind and healthy discernment, like Kennedy, his townsman and generous friend. Yet Poe showed tact in choosing Griswold, and builded better than he knew. He could select no more indefatigable book-wright to bring together his scattered writings, and he counted upon Death's paying all debts. In this Poe was mistaken. For once Griswold wrote as he thought and felt, and his memoir, however spiteful and unchivalrous, was more sincere than many of the sycophantic sketches in the bulky volumes of his "Poets and Poetry." Malice made him eloquent, and an off-hand obituary notice of the poet was the most nervous piece of work that ever came from his pen. It was heartless, and, in some respects, inaccurate. It brought so much wrath upon him that he became vindictive, and followed it up with a memoir, which, as an exhibition of the ignoble nature of its author, scarcely has a parallel. Did this in the end affect Poe's fame injuriously? Far otherwise; it moved a host of writers, beginning with Willis and Graham, to recall his habit of life, and reveal the good side of it. Some have gone as far in eulogy as Griswold went toward the opposite extreme. It seemed a cruel irony of fate that Poe's own biographer should plant thorns upon his grave, but he also planted laurels. He paid an unstinted tribute to the poet's genius, and this was the only concession which Poe himself would care to demand. With sterner irony, Time brings in his revenges! In a familiar edition of the poet's works, for which Griswold laid the groundwork, the memoir by Ingram is devoted largely to

*Griswold's
memoir.*

*Effect
upon Poe's
fame.*

*Poe's
habits and
tempera-
ment.*

correcting the errors of the Doctor's long-since excluded sketch, and to exposing every act of malice against Poe which Griswold committed, either before or after his foeman's death.

After years of censure and defence, and in the light of his own writings, the poet's character is not "beyond all conjecture." Here was a man of letters who fulfilled the traditions of a past century in this western world and modern time ; one over-possessed and hampered by the very temperament that made him a poet — and this, too, when he thought himself deliberate and calculating. His head was superbly developed, his brain-power too great for its resources of supply and control. The testimony of some who knew his home-life is that he was tender and lovable. Graham and Willis aver that he was patient and regular in work, and scrupulous to return a just amount of labor for value received. But many who knew and befriended him have spoken, more in sorrow than in anger, of his treachery and thanklessness, of his injustice to himself, and of the degrading excesses which plunged him into depths from which it grew more and more difficult to lift him.

*Love of
the ideal a
restraint
upon sen-
suality.*

Nevertheless, Poe was not a man of immoral habits. I assert that scholars, writers, and artists, in spite of a tradition to the contrary, are less given, as a class, to forbidden pleasures than business-men and idle men of the world. Study and a love of the ideal protect them against the sensuality by which too many dull the zest of their appetites. Poe was no exception to the rule. He was not a libertine. Woman was to him the impersonation of celestial beauty, her influence soothed and elevated him, and in her presence he was gentle, winning, and subdued. There is not an unchaste suggestion in the whole course of his writings,

*Chastity of
Poe's writ-
ings.*

— a remarkable fact, in view of his acquaintance with the various schools of French literature. His works are almost too spiritual. Not of the earth, earthy, their personages meet with the rapture and co-absorption of disembodied souls. His verse and prose express devotion to Beauty in her most ethereal guise, and he justly might cry out with Shelley :—

“ I vowed that I would dedicate my powers
To thee and thine ; have I not kept the vow ? ”

Nor was he undevotional. His sense of the sublime and mystical filled him with thoughts of other worlds and existences than ours ; if there is pride, there is reverence, in his bold imaginings. He felt a spark of the divine fire within him, and the pride of his intellectual disdain was, like the Titan's, a not inglorious sin. Finally, Poe was not an habitual drunkard. He had woful fits of drunkenness, varying in frequency, and sometimes of degradation ; for a single glass made him the easy prey of any coarse and pitiless hands into which he might fall. He was a man inebriate when sober, his brain surging with emotion, and a stimulant that only served to steady common men bewildered him. As with women, the least contamination was to him debasement. His mature years were a battle with inherited taint, and there were long periods in which he was the victor. This taint had been increased by drugging in infancy, and by the convivial usages of his guardian's household. Bearing in mind, also, the lack of self-control inherent in Celtic and Southern natures, I think he made a plucky fight. The duty of self-support was not one to which he had been trained, and was more than he could bear. Imagine Shelley, who made his paper boats of bank-notes, Byron and Landor, who had their old estates,

*Not a
scoffer nor
an habit-
ual drunk-
ard.*

*His hered-
itary taint.*

*Effects of
poverty.
Cp. "Victorian
Poets":
p. 81.*

forced to write by the column for their weekly board. "Poverty has this disease: through want it teaches a man evil." More, it limits the range of his possibilities. Doudan has said, with truth and feeling, that he who is without security for the morrow can neither meditate upon nor accomplish a lasting work. The delicate fancies of certain writers are not always at quick command, and the public is loath to wait and pay for quality. Poe, more than once, fell into disgrace by not being able to meet his literary engagements on time. His most absurd and outrageous articles, such as the one put forth after his Boston lecture, were the bluster of a man who strove to hide a sense of humiliation and failure. Doubtless, he secretly invoked the gods in his own behalf. He knew, like Chénier going to his death, that it was a pity — he was worth saving. Generous efforts, in truth, were made to save him, by strong and tender friends, but these were quite in vain. He carried a death-warrant within him. Well might he feel that a spell was on him, and in one tale and another try to make the world — which he affected to despise — comprehend its fatality, and bespeak the sympathetic verdict of the future upon his defeat and doom.

*His sensitive
temperament.*

It is just that well-balanced persons should rebuke the failings of genius. But let such an one imagine himself with a painfully sensitive organization, — "all touch, all eye, all ear"; with appetites almost resistless; with a frame in which health and success breed a dangerous rapture, disease and sorrow a fatal despair. Surmount all this with a powerful intelligence that does not so much rule the structure as it menaces it, and threatens to shake it asunder. Let him con-

struggling to adjust himself to it. He, too, might find his judgment a broken reed ; his passions might get the upper hand ; his perplexities bring him to shamelessness and ruin. It was thus the poet's curse came upon him, and the wings of his Psyche were sorrowfully trailed in the dust. I have said to friends as they sneered at the ill-managed life of one whose special genius perhaps could not exist but in union with certain infirmities, that instead of recounting these, and deriding them, they should hedge him round with their protection. We can find more than one man of sense among a thousand, but how rarely a poet with such a gift ! When he has gone his music will linger, and be precious to those who never have heard, like ourselves, the sweet bells jangled.

The priceless rarity of genius.

Making every allowance, Poe was terribly blamable. We all are misunderstood, and all condemned to toil. The sprites have their task-work, and cannot always be dancing in the moonlight. At times, we are told, they have to consort with what is ugly, and even take on its guise. Unhappily, Poe was the reverse of one who "fortune's buffets and rewards has ta'en with equal thanks." He stood good fortune more poorly than bad ; any emotion would upset him, and his worst falls were after successes, or with success just in sight. His devotion to beauty was eagerly selfish. He had a heart, and in youth was loyal to those he loved. In this respect he differed from the hero of "A Strange Story," born without affection or soul. But his dream was that of "The Palace of Art"—a lordly pleasure-house, where taste and love should have their fill, regardless of the outer world. It has been well said, that if not immoral, he was unmoral. With him an end justified the means, and he had no conception of the law and limitations

Lack of self-poise.

Not immoral, but unmoral.

of liberty, no practical sense of right or wrong. At the most, he ignored such matters as things irrelevant. Now it is not essential that one should have a creed ; he may relegate theologies to the regions of the unknowable ; but he must be just in order to fear not, and humane that he may be loved ; he must be faithful to some moral standard of his own, otherwise his house, however beautiful and lordly, is founded in the sand.

*Is genius
the product
of neurotic
disorder ?*

The question always will recur, whether, if Poe had been able to govern his life aright, he would not also have been conventional and tame, and so much the less a poet. Were it not for his excesses and neurotic crises, should we have had the peculiar quality of his art and the works it has left us ? I cannot here discuss the theory that his genius was a frenzy, and that poetry is the product of abnormal nerve-vibrations. The claim, after all, is a scientific statement of the belief that great wits are sure to madness near allied. An examination of it involves the whole ground of fate, free will, and moral responsibility. I think that Poe was bounden for his acts. He never failed to resent infringements upon his own manor ; and, however poor his self-control, it was not often with him that the chord of self passed trembling out of sight. Possibly his most exquisite, as they were his most poetic, moments, were at those times when he seemed very wretched, and avowed himself oppressed by a sense of doom. He loved his share of pain, and was an instance of the fact that man is the one being that takes keen delight in the tragedy of its own existence, and for whom

"Joy is deepest when it springs from woe."

ished, invoking the spectral midnight skies, believing himself the Orestes of his race—in all this he was fulfilling his nature, deriving the supremest sensations, feeding on the plants of night from which such as he obtain their sustenance or go famished. They who do not perceive this never will comprehend the mysteries of art and song, of the heart from whose recesses these must be evoked. They err who commiserate Poe for such experiences. My own pity for him is of another kind; it is that which we ever must feel for one in whom the rarest possibilities were blighted by an inherent *lack of will*. In his sensitiveness to impressions like the foregoing, he had at once the mood and material for far greater results than he achieved. A violin cracks none the sooner for being played in a minor key. His instrument broke for want of a firm and even hand to use it—a virile, devoted master to prolong the strain.

*Secret of
Poe's dis-
asters.*

Poe's demand for his present wish was always strong, yet it was the caprice of a child, and not the determination that stays and conquers. He was no more of an egoist than was Goethe; but self-absorption is the edged tool that maims a wavering hand. His will, in the primary sense, was weak from the beginning. It became more and more reduced by those habits which, of all the defences of a noble mind, attack this stronghold first. It was not able to preserve for him the sanity of true genius, and his product, therefore, was so much the less complete.

*No real
strength of
will.*

"O well for him whose will is strong!
He suffers, but he will not suffer long."

Poe suffered, in bitter truth, and the end came not through triumph, but in death. His fame is not what it might have been, we say; yet it is greater than he

*Fame
waits on
worth and
work.*

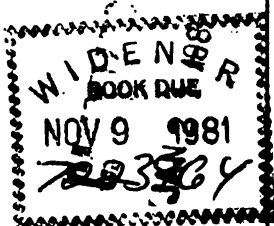
— dying with a sense of incompleteness — probably expected it to be, and more than he could have asked. In spite, then, of the most reckless career, the work a man really accomplishes — both for what it is in itself and for what it reveals of the author's gift — in the end will be valued exactly at its worth. Does the poet, the artist, demand some promise that it also may be made to tell during our working life, and even that life be lengthened till the world shall learn to honor it? Let him recall the grave, exalted words which Poe took at hazard for his "Ligeia," and stayed not to dwell upon their spiritual meaning: "Man doth not yield himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his own feeble will."

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